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ALL FOR HERSELF.

VOL. I.

ALL FOR HERSELF.

BY

SHIRLEY SMITH.

"Così fan tutte."

"In law what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil."

Merchant of Venice.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO
MAJOR WHYTE MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF
"GOOD FOR NOTHING,"

I DEDICATE
MY FIRST NOVEL.

ALL FOR HERSELF.

CHAPTER I.

THE blinds are drawn down in all the front windows of a house in Dorset Square ; there is a thick layer of tan spread for a long distance in the roadway, to deaden the roll of wheels in the thoroughfare ; and the passers-by wonder vaguely who is ill, and what the malady is. The master of the house, a man of only five-and-twenty, is ill, his malady is low fever, and before the bright and beautiful day of grace upon which this story opens is over, a life which had known in its short course but little happiness, will

have ended, and the sufferer who had borne a heavy cross will have laid it down for ever, and gone to his rest.

Everything that was possible had been done for him, but three clever doctors have declared that nothing but a miracle can save him, and at five o'clock in the afternoon the carriage of the fourth, who had been called in to confirm or contradict the verdict of his professional brethren, was standing at the hall door, and the great man was in the bedroom with his colleagues. He makes a minute and careful examination of the patient, who lies in a sort of stupor with closed eyes, and who, if he feels or hears, makes no sign; a professional nurse stands a little apart from the group of doctors, and answers when she is spoken to; but there is no relative present. If the dying man has wife, child, or sister they are not with him at that moment.

Having given a few, a very few, direc-

tions to the nurse, the four doctors retired for their consultation ; it is not very long ; they are unanimous in the opinion that the young man is dying, that he will probably not survive the night. One of the four thinks that if he had been forced, in the earlier stages of the attack, to take an extra quantity of nourishment he might have pulled through ; the others shake their heads, and declare that he has a feeble constitution, that his lungs are not sound, and that, although an extra amount of nourishment and strong stimulant might have kept him up for a time, it would have been cruel to force them upon him.

Then it was suggested that it would be well to tell the young man's wife of his dangerous state, so a bell was rung and a message sent to the mistress of the house.

"Strange to say, although I have been here three and four times a week for the last month, I have never seen her with

him, never seen her at all, in fact," said one of the doctors to his companions.

"Ah, indeed! how strange!" said the others, without much show of interest, and yet all four waited with some curiosity for the coming of the lady. In about five minutes the door opened to admit the loveliest young woman they had ever seen. The most captious of critics could not have found the slightest fault with either face or figure; she was very pale, but perfectly calm and self-possessed.

Each of the four doctors had formed in his own mind an ideal Mrs. Westbrook, and it is almost needless to say that all four were wrong. One was quite sure that she was old enough to be the mother of the man who lay dying; the second, that she was a vulgar, showy woman of the barmaid type, who had beguiled him into marriage, and who was now looking forward to the enjoyment of liberty and her settlement; the third, that she was

probably a poor weak-minded, sickly girl, who was so overwhelmed by the approach of sorrow that she would get into hysterics on the spot, and give no end of trouble; the fourth expected to see a severe-looking female of the strong-minded class, who married the poor young fellow almost in spite of himself, then bullied him unmercifully, and finally despised and neglected him for dying so slowly.

Judge, then, the astonishment of the quartette when they saw before them an exquisitely lovely and graceful woman, who was neither middle-aged, strong-minded, vulgar, nor hysterical.

“You sent for me, gentlemen,” she said, in a clear and musical voice.

The four men looked at each other as if to say, “I can’t do it; you must tell her.” Then one of them—he was past sixty, and had been present at many a painful scene—stepped forward a few paces and said kindly—“We beg, madam,

that you will be calm—" then he stopped short; there was not a trace of emotion on the beautiful face, nor in the large eyes which were looking full at him, so it seemed absurd to ask her to be calm.

"I think you may trust me," she answered, in the same low voice.

"Then, madam, we regret to have to inform you,"—the doctor's manner had changed a little and there was a shade of sternness in his voice—"that we cannot hold out any hope that your husband's life will be spared."

Not a quiver passed over the beautiful face, the eyes were still undimmed.

"I have thought so for some time," she answered, and as she spoke, it occurred simultaneously to the four men that a woman of the barmaid, strong-minded, or hysterical type would have shown more feeling than this handsome young creature had done.

"Then," replied the spokesman, "you

have probably made arrangements ; you ought not to be alone at such a time ; you are both so young ; it is sad for you to be parted so soon."

At last he had touched her, or her self-control had suddenly broken down ; she covered her face, and they could hear her weeping bitterly behind her handkerchief.

"Poor child, poor child !" said the old doctor, compassionately ; a moment before he had been ready to accuse her of want of feeling, and he was now remorseful in proportion to his former severity. He went over to her and laid his hand kindly upon her shoulder ; she allowed it to rest there for a few seconds, and then, suddenly letting her own hands fall, she turned upon him the full radiance of her beauty, and from that hour he was prepared to swear, if necessary, that everything said and done by Mrs. Westbrook was right.

But his time was too precious to be

wasted even in comforting so beautiful a mourner, so he shook hands, begged her to be calm, murmured something about death coming to all of us, and then disappeared in the wake of his colleagues.

When she was alone, Mrs. Westbrook walked up and down the room with a smile upon her face.

"How easy it is to make fools of them," she thought. "Between eighteen and eighty I can turn all of them round my finger."

An hour later she was called by the nurse to her husband's room. The stupor in which he had lain for some hours had suddenly passed away, and he had grown restless and feverish; he had been talking, too, but so incoherently that the nurse could not understand what he said, but more than once he had called his wife by name, and had looked anxiously about the room.

Mrs. Westbrook dismissed the nurse

and sat down by the bedside. To a looker-on it might have seemed hard that such a beautiful creature should be obliged to stay in that dark room while the world outside was at its gayest and brightest; but to judge by the placid expression of her face she was not pining at the irksomeness of her position. She sat perfectly still, she did not look anxious or unhappy, she seemed simply satisfied to watch and wait. The muttering from the bed ceased after a while, and lulled by the intense stillness of the room, Mrs. Westbrook fell asleep. How long her sleep lasted she could not tell, but she suddenly started broad awake, conscious that something unusual had happened; she had felt eyes upon her face.

Her husband was sitting up in bed, resting himself upon one elbow, and he was looking at her intently. For a few seconds longer the silence lasted, and then, in a voice made powerful with the

false strength of excitement, he said—

“Cecilia, you are near the fruition of all your hopes and schemes, for I am dying.”

She did not answer a word, but turned her face away from him resolutely.

“You may turn your face from me,” he went on, “but still you must listen to what I say. It will scarcely surprise you to hear that I am glad to die; you have been very cautious, you have done as much for me during this illness as any man has a right to expect from a woman who——”

“Edgar, for God’s sake be silent!” she cried out at last.

“I must be silent soon,” he answered, and his voice had suddenly grown very weak; “but if I do not speak to you now, I must die with the words unsaid. Cecilia, I have paid for my mad love for you with my life, for you have broken my heart. When five years ago you married me, not because you loved me, but to put a seal upon my lips, I was so infatuated at

the thought of calling you mine that I forgot the baseness of the act by which you secured for yourself the wealth which had no charm for me without you. You encouraged me in the excesses that broke my father's heart, you turned my mother against me, and then you married me to tempt me to forget that you had robbed me, and now——”

“You are raving, Edgar,” she interrupted quite fiercely, “how dare you speak to me of baseness!”

“I dare because I am on my deathbed,” he answered, “and because, poor fool that I am, I love you still, and I was going to add just now that, had you loved me, I could have forgiven you all! Oh, if I could but bring back my early faith in you, if I could look upon you still with blind lover's eyes, if I could make you innocent and true as you are lovely and fascinating; I might pray to have my life prolonged, in order to finish it as I began it: your slave.”

"I cannot bear this," she cried, suddenly starting up from beside him. "Why do you not——"

"Die silently, is that your wish? Then hear mine, which is, that you disturb me no more with your presence. I forgive you as I hope to be forgiven; but oh, Cecilia, think what your life has been——"

"It would have been happy and good enough if you had never crossed my path," she interrupted; "but these reproaches are not seemly between us at such a time," she leaned over him as she spoke, and arranged the pillows. "Try to be calm, and get some sleep," she said, "and you will be better to-morrow."

"Yes, much better," he answered, "good night."

She rang the bell for the nurse, waited until she came, and then went away softly. Never was there a stranger scene. The wife, in all the pride of her youth and beauty, left the husband to die alone—the

husband who had loved her with passionate and devoted love; but her desertion gave him no pain. The ties which had bound him to life had long since snapped asunder, and he was calmly and trustfully awaiting the call of death. Through great tribulation he had at last found rest, and his one earthly care was in the thought that the woman for whose sake he had suffered so much, would probably at his death break out into a wild career of reckless folly.

At this point, a sketch of her history up to the time of her marriage will not be out of place.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN the only sister of Mr. Calvert, of Calvert Hall, S—shire, married Mr. Westbrook, a man without a grandfather, but with a large income realised in trade, her friends called her a lucky girl. She was not very young at the time of her marriage, but she was handsome, as all the Calverts were; good-natured and easily led—also traits in the Calvert family; and she made Mr. Westbrook a good wife. He was a kind, affectionate husband, and they lived together a very luxurious but rather hum-drum life in their comfortable, solid-looking house in Dorset Square.

They had only one child, a son, and for

five years Mrs. Westbrook went on hoping for a daughter; but her health was not very good, so she gave up hoping at last, and with the cordial consent of her husband, proposed to adopt one of her brother's girls—as babies came only too fast at Calvert Hall. The eldest girl, Cecilia, was gladly given up to her aunt; she was chosen because she was also Mrs. Westbrook's godchild, and had been called after her. When she was introduced to her little cousin Edgar, who was a pretty boy of seven, and just three years her senior, as his future companion and playfellow, he became her boyish lover on the spot, and she tyrannised over him, as an imperious girl-child always can do over a yielding and somewhat effeminate boy.

Edgar was a delicate child, so he was educated at home; but Cecilia was sent to a first-rate school, for Mrs. Westbrook had found her somewhat hard to manage. The girl was by nature domineering in

temper, lax in principle, and selfish in disposition. But she was also, even in early childhood, cunning enough to assume almost any virtue, to hide any defect, in order to gain praise and popularity. At school she achieved sufficient of both to make her happy. She had a quick, parrot-like facility for picking up languages and accomplishments, which charmed her teachers, whilst she was no less lauded by her companions for the skill with which she used to smuggle forbidden books into the school, and the generosity with which she used to spend in presents the pocket-money lavished upon her by her indulgent aunt.

Before she was sixteen, there was scarcely a pernicious novel in French and English which she had not carefully read—not skimmed over, as some girls would have done, but studied and thought over. Thus, in worldly knowledge of the worst and most dangerous kind, she was a proficient at a very early age. But one of the

first uses she made of her knowledge, if I may so express myself, was to keep it carefully in the background, so that, to her uncle and aunt, and to the quiet people whom she met at Dorset Square, she was only a bright, clever girl, for her age remarkably sensible and self-possessed.

But to one member of the Quaker-like household, her cousin Edgar, she was simply the most beautiful and perfect creature in the world. Perhaps it was the great contrast between her exuberant health and high spirits, and his own nervous excitable temperament, which drew him towards her with a fascination he was powerless to resist. As for her, she secretly despised him, and delighted to use her influence over him for evil instead of good. She used to urge him to do things which she declared were manly, and, therefore, to be admired; and when he would hang back, not so much from principle as from sheer lack of energy, she would laugh

at him unmercifully, and call him "Pretty baby Edgar!"

Between sneering and cajoling she contrived, as she said, to put some spirit into him; and when once he began to frequent theatres, race-meetings, and music-halls, he found it but too easy to go on. He was rather weak and easily influenced, and his cousin found it by no means hard, after a time, to persuade him that his home was exceedingly dull. He was obliged to keep his proceedings from the knowledge of his father, for old Mr. Westbrook set his face sternly against all such unholy amusements as races and theatres, and had never seen a race run or a play acted in his life.

Feeling quite sure that he had taken every possible precaution to keep his parents in ignorance of the nature of his amusements, Edgar was always very much surprised to find what accurate information his father seemed to have upon the subject, but the infatuated youth never for a mo-

ment suspected that his beautiful cousin might have betrayed him.

He would go straight from a severe lecture in the study to a room which was known in the house as Cecilia's boudoir, and there, throwing himself at her feet, he would pour out his troubles and ask her how it had been possible for the "governor" to find him out. At first the boy was able to bear up well enough against his father's anger, but by degrees he grew restless and rebellious, declaring that he was not going to be tied down like a child; then he went rapidly from bad to worse, came home more than once under the influence of drink, and Cecilia shrewdly suspected that he was in debt.

She made him confess, and helped him out of her own ample supply of pocket money. So, delighted with this proof that she, his idol and Mentor, did not find fault with him, but rather laughed at him for being so frightened about what other men

—Edgar was not nineteen at the time—would think a good joke, he went on gambling, betting, and borrowing money to pay the debts which were increasing every day.

One day, in an outburst of sentimental, but very genuine passion, he asked his cousin to marry him. She only ridiculed his wild avowal. Maddened by her refusal to treat his proposal seriously, he turned upon her and accused her of having encouraged both his love and his excesses. She knew perfectly well that all he said was true; but the girl of seventeen was more than a match for the youth of nineteen. She would not let him go until he actually knelt at her feet and implored her pardon; then she generously forgave him and promised to be his *friend*.

But even a true friend would have found it hard to save him then, and Cecilia's friendship was ruinous. He grew wilder and wilder, and when at last, broken-

hearted by his conduct, his father died suddenly, no one was surprised that the whole of his property was left without reserve to Mrs. Westbrook. This was a terrible blow to Edgar, who had borrowed largely on the strength of his expectations. He appealed to his mother for help, but she would not listen to him. She had been devotedly attached to her husband, and she blamed Edgar for having caused his death.

In despair he went to his cousin, knowing that her influence with her aunt was unbounded. Cecilia was alone in the dressing-room, which had been her uncle's, making an inventory of the jewelry which had belonged to him, in order that it might be valued before probate of his will was taken out. Edgar sat down opposite to her. She was looking so handsome in her deep mourning that the poor haggard youth, who idolized her so blindly, fell every moment more deeply in love. She

heard his appeal for intercession in silence, and then frankly told him that she was quite sure she could not help him.

"But perhaps if you are patient and steady, Edgar," she continued, as she carefully polished the setting of a magnificent diamond ring, "my aunt will relent."

The jewel flashed in his weary eyes as he listened; it had been given to Mr. Westbrook, on the occasion of his marriage, by a few of his rich friends, and it was looked upon as an heirloom in the family. Edgar made no reply to his cousin's remark, but held out his hand for the ring.

"This ought to have been left to me," he said. "It is an awful shame that I was not even mentioned in the will. I've a mind to take this ring and go off to Australia."

"Well, it would not have occurred to me to better my position by turning

thief," she said, laughing; "but I know you are not serious."

"Of course I am not," he replied. "I have been a cursed fool, but if I got a chance I might come all right again. Cecilia"—and he suddenly put down the ring and seized both her hands—"if I reform will you listen to me? I love you more than ever, and I do not think you would be as kind as you are sometimes if you did not like me a little."

She released one of her hands with a sudden pull and struck him a sharp blow upon the arm; she was as strong as a young lioness, and he let her go with a jerk. She fell back upon her chair, and the sleeve of her dress swept the diamond ring from the table. In an instant she and Edgar were on their knees looking for it, but it could not be found.

"I saw it roll in that direction," Cecilia called out to her cousin, who was search-

ing at a distance from the table, "so it's useless to look about here." She got up as she spoke and went over to him; he was on his hands and knees, and he had had his back towards her from the time he knelt down.

"I cannot find it," he said at last. "It must be about the table, just where it fell."

"Impossible," she answered. "Come and look for yourself; it is so bright that it would be seen at once."

He got up, red with the exertion he had made. Cecilia, on the contrary, was several shades paler than usual.

"It must be found, Edgar," she said, looking full at him.

His face flushed still more deeply.

"I believe you think I have picked it up secretly. Oh! Cecilia, why are you so cruel to me?"

"I am not cruel," she replied coldly. "If the ring is on the ground surely you

can find it. Stay, if we light a candle we may see it; it may have rolled into a dark corner, and if so, it will sparkle in the candle-light."

The candle was lighted, and the search began again; every corner was peered into, but the ring was not found. The cousins stood looking at one another for a few seconds in silence, then Cecilia spoke.

"The man comes to-morrow to value the jewels; if the ring is found before twelve o'clock, Edgar, it will be time enough."

"I have done all I can about it," he answered sadly; and the heart must have been hard indeed which did not feel pity for him then. His face was white to the very lips, and he actually trembled as he met his cousin's eyes. She did not speak again, but just smiled a little.

"Then you do suspect me, Cecilia," he stammered—"you of all people in the

world! Oh, my darling!" The boy had become a man in those few moments.

"I know that you are in debt," she answered, very low; "that you have no money, and that a valuable ring, which you just now wished was yours, was in my hands a few minutes ago and cannot now be found."

Edgar darted forward and fell on his knees before her.

"Cecilia!" he cried, "if I swear that I have not got it will you not believe me?"

His young accuser—she had got back her colour now—actually smiled at him again.

"You think I am a child, Edgar," she said, "and so I am, perhaps, in age, and perhaps, too, that is the reason why I cannot manage a thing of this kind as cleverly as an older person would do. I only know that the ring your poor father was so fond of cannot be found, and I think it is very silly of you to kneel there

talking about it, instead of trying to find it. If anyone were to come in now they would think we were playing some game, and my dear uncle not a month in his grave."

"You spoke wisely enough just now," he said wearily, as he got up. He had noticed the change to the manner of a puzzled but straightforward child, which she had put on so quickly, and it baffled him.

"Are you hiding it to plague me?" he asked suddenly, after a short pause, thinking that, perhaps, she was childish enough to amuse herself at his expense.

"You know I am not," she replied, stamping her foot indignantly; "and if you are playing with me, I think the joke has lasted quite long enough."

"God knows I am not joking," he answered, dejectedly, "and perhaps after all, it may be found."

"It will be better not to say anything

about it until to-morrow." He looked relieved as she said this, and the more so that there was not now an atom of suspicion in her voice.

She left him, but only to play him false, for she went at once to his mother's room and told her what had happened. Mrs. Westbrook became much excited.

"The ungrateful, wicked boy!" she said, and repeated the words over and over again; it never occurred to her to doubt his guilt. Then Cecilia threw in a word of hope, just as she had done to the poor youth himself.

"It may have rolled away," she said, "and we may find it this evening."

But Mrs. Westbrook was not in a hopeful mood.

"I am sure he has it," she said, "and if he does not confess, he is my son no longer, I disown him; but I have a dear good loving daughter still." She folded her arms round Cecilia's neck, and the girl

saw herself in perspective the happy mistress of £30,000 a-year.

The next morning Mrs. Westbrook sent for her son and asked him if he had found the ring. He protested in the most solemn manner that he had not even seen it since it had fallen ; but he was not believed, and his mother ordered him out of her presence with the announcement that until he confessed his guilt and gave up the ring he must be content to live in her house as a stranger.

“You broke your father’s heart with your extravagance and dissipation,” she said, “and now you are breaking mine ; but I am thankful that he did not know what you are capable of.”

It was in vain for poor Edgar to make any protest, and so for six months he lived on in his mother’s house with this black cloud resting upon him. A hundred times he made up his mind to run away, but he feared that by so doing he might

give up his sole chance of proving his innocence; his mother would naturally conclude that, as he was entirely without resources, he must have turned the diamond into money to get funds for his flight.

But another motive, far more powerful than the fear of confirming the suspicion under which he lived, held him fast; his wild and passionate love for his beautiful cousin. It is hardly too much to say that in the miserable six months which elapsed between the deaths of his father and mother his love became slavish idolatry. Cecilia was so kind and tender to him, almost loving sometimes, he thought. If she still suspected him in the matter of the ring, no sign that she did so appeared in either words or manner; and it was now the one solace of his life to sit in her presence, silent and absorbed, spell-bound almost by her beauty, and feeding himself

with the hope that she would one day be his:

Urged thereto by the persuasions of her niece, his mother paid all his debts, but she took care to let him know that he owed her generosity to the intercession of Cecilia. Having thus freed him from his embarrassments, the girl watched eagerly for his relapse into the dissipations which had already dragged him down so low; but she watched in vain, for he had made a vow never again to touch a card or attend a race-meeting, and he bravely kept his word. He had not been an habitual drunkard, so it was easy for him to give up wine.

But day by day, slowly but surely, the estrangement with his mother increased. The ring was not spoken of in the household, but it was ever in the minds of those concerned in its loss, and the mystery connected with it weighed heavily upon the mind of the unhappy Edgar.

Mrs. Westbrook outlived her husband only six months, and she died without having been openly reconciled to her son ; but during the last hour of her life it seemed to those about her that she would gladly have taken him back to her heart had the power been given to her to express her wishes. It was sad to think that if she repented of her harshness to him she was not able to tell him of her repentance ; and her niece, who never for one moment left her bedside, was one of the first to see that she had something on her mind. She faintly uttered Edgar's name at intervals, while her eyes wandered restlessly round the room as if in search of him.

"It is a risk, but it must be done," Cecilia said to herself, as she stole out to fetch her cousin.

She brought him back with her, and at sight of him, with his arm still clasped

round with Cecilia's hand, the face of the dying woman brightened.

"My poor boy!" she said, in her weak, broken voice. It was all she could utter for some seconds, then she motioned that he was to bend over her.

"Forgive me, I have wronged you, but she will atone." She made a feeble effort to clasp the hands 'of the cousins together as she spoke, and by the action they knew what her desire was concerning their future. Edgar's face flushed high, and not even the awful presence in which he stood could keep down the rapture that filled his heart at the thought that his mother wished for his marriage with Cecilia. As for her, she stood as impassive as if she had been made of stone; her beautiful face was white and calm, and the hand he held so tightly was very cold. With her failing eyes fixed upon the face of the girl for whom she

had wronged her own child with an irremediable wrong, Mrs. Westbrook passed away.

CHAPTER III.

EDGAR did not see his cousin until after the funeral. She telegraphed to Calvert Hall for her father and mother to come to her, but her father alone obeyed her summons, her mother was too full of lamentations at the probable return of her eldest daughter to the Hall to interfere with the prospects of her little sister Helen, who was then nearly fourteen. Mrs. Calvert had most fervently hoped that Cecilia would have married her cousin Edgar before the death of his parents; but there had not been a hint given even of an engagement, and of course, now that her aunt and uncle were dead—it was very inconsiderate of Mrs.

Westbrook to die so soon after her husband, Mrs. Calvert thought—the proper place for Cecilia was her father's house.

It was at the ceremony of reading Mrs. Westbrook's will that Edgar's longing to see Cecilia was again gratified. She came into the room where he and Mr. Harper, the family lawyer, were waiting for her, leaning upon her father's arm. She was, of course, dressed in deep mourning ; she kept her eyes upon the ground, and her face was as pale as it had been when she stood beside her dying aunt.

Edgar went forward eagerly to meet her.

"My darling !" he whispered tenderly. He looked upon her now as his promised wife.

But without a word she turned from him and sat down beside the lawyer to hear the will. The man of business was, next to Edgar, the most agitated of the party. He glanced from one cousin to the other, as he fumbled with his papers, and



looked most uncomfortable. But there was no escape for him ; he had come there to read the will of his late client, and he had to go through with it.

The document was very short, but the contents fell like a thunder-clap upon at least two of the listeners, Mr. Calvert and his nephew. The whole of her property, amounting to upwards of thirty thousand a year, Mrs. Westbrook left unconditionally to her niece, Cecilia Calvert, also her house, furniture, plate, pictures, books and jewels, to be hers absolutely when she reached the age of eighteen ; the name of Edgar was not even mentioned.

Mr. Calvert was the first to break the silence that fell upon the group when the lawyer had finished.

"I think there must be some mistake," he said, "are you sure"—turning to the lawyer—"that Mrs. Westbrook did not write a codicil? I fully expected that my daughter would be remembered, but

that she should get all is incredible."

"But, nevertheless, quite true," replied Mr. Harper. "Mrs. Westbrook knew perfectly well what she was doing when she made this will."

"What is the date of the will?" Edgar asked, raising his head, and trying hard to steady his voice, "you read it, of course, but I have forgotten."

It was pitiable to see the change that had come over his face in those few moments: he was not yet twenty, and he looked nearly double that age.

"The date is so and so," replied the lawyer, "just six weeks after the death of your father."

"Then I understand it all," said Edgar, getting up and addressing Mr. Calvert. "For some time before my father's death," he continued—his voice was steady enough by that time, and he spoke out with manly frankness—"I had been both dissipated and extravagant, and I had got heavily in

debt, indeed, I fear my conduct hastened my father's end, and most bitterly do I regret my sin and folly. About a month after his death, a very valuable ring, a diamond, disappeared. I need not trouble you with the particulars of the loss"—he glanced at Cecilia as he spoke—"but my mother suspected that I had made away with it, and as I was quite unable to prove my innocence, she would not believe my simple assertion, and therefore made a will in my cousin's favour. But I must not forget to add that she paid all my debts; so if I go out into the world a beggar, I have at least the satisfaction of knowing that I have not hurt anyone but myself." He spoke at the end with great bitterness.

"But is it possible," said Mr. Calvert, "that even at the end your mother showed no signs of relenting? My poor sister used to be the kindest-hearted creature in the world."

"She did!" cried Cecilia eagerly; but Edgar stopped her.

"My mother sent for me when she was dying and almost speechless," he said, "and I am sure that, had it been in her power then, she would have atoned for the wrong she had done me; but it was too late."

"No, Edgar!" exclaimed Mr. Calvert, who pitied the young man from his heart, "it is not too late. I am sure my daughter will not consent to profit so largely at your expense; half, a quarter of the income your poor mother has left her, would be riches to Cecilia! It cannot be done all in a moment, of course, but we must make an equitable arrangement."

"I cannot be a pensioner on my cousin's bounty," Edgar answered quickly, and with an intonation of pain in his voice which Cecilia alone understood. Then he crossed the room to her side, and said in a low voice—"Tell me, oh, tell me, that you

did not know of this, that, if in your power, you would have prevented this cruel wrong?"

"Can you doubt it?" she answered, looking up at him with an expression which made him forget everything except her superb beauty.

"I must see you alone, but not just yet," he said again. "I must have time to think and grow calm. You will let me stay in your house for a few days, will you not, Cecilia?"

"Edgar!" She laid her hand for a moment upon his arm and looked at him with gentle reproach. There were tears in her beautiful eyes, and had they been alone such a look would have made him once more pour out the passionate love and hopeless despair which were making wild work in his heart and brain just then; but he was obliged to command himself, and after one long look into her face he turned away and left the room.

The lawyer also disappeared, carrying his papers with him, and Cecilia had to bear alone all the force of her father's indignation. The honest, straightforward Englishman was not proud of his daughter's inheritance ; on the contrary, he was, as he expressed it, "ashamed to look that poor young fellow in the face."

"But even if I had not got the property, papa," said Cecilia, calmly, "it would have been just the same thing, so far as Edgar is concerned, for my aunt would have left all her money in charity, and I am sure it is better to have it in the family than squandered upon an hospital."

"I do not want any suppositions upon the subject," replied Mr. Calvert, angrily. "She has left you rich and her son a beggar, and what you are to do with £30,000 a year, I cannot tell."

"Oh, papa, you know I have always been accustomed to plenty of money ; I like it."

"But what is the truth about that ring?" her father went on. "Why was it not found?"

Cecilia smiled.

"I believe you think he took it."

"I believe that either he or I took it," she answered calmly. "We were together in the room when it disappeared," and then she told all the circumstances of the loss to her father.

"But I cannot see his motive for taking it," Mr. Calvert insisted. "It was left to his mother, and in course of time, no doubt, it would have been his by will."

"But you forget, papa, that at that time his debts were not paid."

"Ah! I see you do suspect the poor fellow, Cecilia."

"It would not be fair to do so," she answered, leisurely, "until we have had a most thorough search made in the dressing-room. The furniture must be all taken out, and the carpet taken up; it

may have rolled quite out of sight."

"And a servant may find it out and prig it secretly," said Mr. Calvert, "and then where are you?"

"Just where we were before," she answered laughing.

"But for this confounded affair of the ring," Mr. Calvert continued, "I could see a way to set all this muddle of the property right. That poor boy*worships you, Cecilia, and you might have married him by-and-by when you were both a little older——"

"But if I do not worship him?" she interrupted quickly.

"That may be very true, my dear, but you do not seem inclined to give up any of the property, and in that case the only reparation in your power is marriage. He seems very amiable, and I daresay you would be very happy."

"Even if the affair of the ring were not cleared up?"

"No," answered Mr. Calvert, after hesitating for a moment, "I must get to the bottom of that business, or you must feel satisfied in your own mind that he is telling the truth."

Cecilia said no more. She knew her father would not be able to satisfy himself on the point, and she also knew that if the necessity were to arise she could easily affirm her belief in Edgar.

She carried out her programme of having a strict search made for the lost ring in the most conscientious manner, overlooking herself the removal of the furniture and carpet; but of course the ring was not found.

It seems almost incredible that a girl so young as Cecilia Calvert could have acted a part with such perfect success; but she had never faltered in her purpose from the moment the idea of supplanting her cousin Edgar had first occurred to her. She had, at a very early age, learned the

power of her beauty, and she determined, if possible, to add to it the power of wealth, and to make herself thereby quite irresistible. It had never given her any pleasure to know that she had always had it in her power to attain her object by marrying her cousin. Wealth would have lost all its charms if it were not her own absolutely. She could have brought herself to marry an old man for his money; but Edgar was young, and even if she outlived him, she would probably be quite an old woman, and have a large family to keep up.

So, although, when she sat down to make the inventory of her uncle's jewels, she had no idea of turning the mother against the son, the thought flashed rapidly into her mind, matured and bore fruit at the moment of Edgar's notice and admiration of the diamond ring. She did not give him credit for having stronger principles than she herself possessed; and she be-

lieved that if she cunningly left the ring in his way he would first secrete and then dispose of it, in order to gain a supply of ready money to gamble with. Then the accident occurred which threw the temptation in his way; but becoming suddenly fearful lest he might prove too honourable to steal, she slipped the ring into her pocket while his back was turned, and allowed the suspicion to fall upon him.

She was not absolutely certain, but she suspected that he was disinherited; hence her kindness to him during the months that he lived almost as a stranger in his mother's house. At first she had thought over the expediency of driving him away altogether by her coldness and caprice; but she did not like to put it into the power of anyone to accuse her of having helped on his ruin; and besides, his blind and slavish worship of her beauty was too sweet to be given up. She liked to play with and to torture him; she liked to see the

rapture with which he received her scant caresses, and to know that she had the power to make him supremely happy or intensely miserable.

She never really repented her weakness in having encouraged him to hang about her until his mother showed signs of relenting at the last; but now that all was over, and that she was the acknowledged heiress and he penniless, she did not feel the slightest compunction in the thought that his dismissal for ever was at hand. Of course a sum sufficient to enable him to emigrate, or to set up in business, must be given to him; but he must also be made to understand that she did not intend to keep up any intercourse with him. Her father's ideas of marriage or division of the property were both equally absurd.

But, made too confident by the success she had already gained, she made a false step which changed the whole current of her life.

About a week after the reading of the will, she had left her father and cousin a little earlier than usual after dinner, and had gone to her own room to think out a plan she had formed for getting rid as quietly and as soon as possible of the unfortunate young man. Edgar had, on his part, also made up his mind not to let another night pass over his head without hearing his fate from Cecilia's own lips. His pride naturally revolted from marrying the woman who had supplanted him. But then she was also the woman whom he loved ; and encouraged by the remembrance of her kindness to him for some months before his mother's death, and by the desire of the dying and evidently remorseful woman to atone to him by suggesting the marriage which would be the crown of his life, he resolved once more to plead to Cecilia his deep and passionate devotion.

She could not doubt the sincerity of his

love, for had she not been dear to him from childhood?

Tortured by the uncertainty, and determined, at all risks, to put an end to it, he soon made an excuse to Mr. Calvert, and followed his cousin from the dining-room. To reach her little boudoir he had to pass through the large drawing-rooms. It was a hot evening in July. The doors and windows were all open, and the perfume of the flowers, with which the balconies were filled, was almost oppressive to the young man's senses as he went by.

His steps fell noiselessly upon the thick carpets; to his own ears, the beating of his heart made more sound. At the open door of Cecilia's room he paused and was about to knock, but his hand fell again, suddenly arrested he scarcely knew why. At the side of the room opposite the door, and facing him as he stood, there was a bow window overlooking the square, and in a low chair facing the window his cousin

was sitting. A box, which might have been workbox or dressing-case, stood open upon a little table beside her, and she held something in her hand which Edgar could not see, but he could hear distinctly the words which she addressed to the inanimate object.

"Who would have thought," she said, in that laughing and caressing tone so often used to children, "that you were worth £30,000 a year to me, you poor, dear little bit of sparkling glass!"

Almost before she had finished, Edgar was behind her chair and had seen the diamond ring in her hand!

Conscious of the presence behind her, she turned her head quickly and saw him. The expression of his face absolutely frightened her. It looked grey and ghastly, and she knew that her whole future depended upon what he said or did within the next few moments.

She got up, walked slowly to the door

and shut it; then she came back to him still holding the ring.

"Cecilia," he said, "if I had come in and found you lying dead it would not have shocked me half so much."

"You prefer your father's ring to me, then," she said, on the impulse of the moment. Had she not felt sure that he had heard what she said as he came in, she would have tried to make him believe that the diamond had just been found.

"Do not try to joke about it," he answered, turning his face away as though he doubted his own power to look at her and to speak harshly at the same moment. "If a stranger had done what you have done, Cissy, no one would wonder; but why did you, you whom I love with all my heart, plan to ruin me?"

"That you must find out without my help," she answered; and something in the tone of her voice compelled him to look at her. The glance brought back

all the fatal glamour of her beauty over the man who doated upon her, and his anger and disgust at her double-dealing began to ebb slowly away. He felt almost sure she could explain everything.

"You know I value wealth only for your sake," he said, trying to speak coldly and calmly; "and yet you allowed my poor mother to die under the impression that I was little better than a thief. You saw my misery, and you had no pity. Oh, Cecilia! have you no heart?"

She was silent for a few moments; but if thought could kill, her cousin would have fallen dead at her feet. Then, rapidly as the idea of secreting the ring had come to her, a way out of the difficulty suggested itself; it was to her a horrible alternative, but she felt that at any sacrifice she must ensure his silence.

"What do you mean to do, Edgar?" she asked, in a low, timid voice.

"I do not know," he answered, startled,

as she had intended he should be. "The first thing, I suppose, is to tell the lawyer and your father that the ring is found. I owe it to myself to clear my name from suspicion ; and yet I hardly know what to do. I cannot bear to tell the truth, but I suppose I must."

She burst out into passionate tears, and for some time was choked by her sobs.

"You think I took it, then?" she gasped out at length, "that I kept it for the purpose of injuring you? Oh, Edgar, Edgar!"—and with a sudden movement she flung her arms round his neck—"I thought you loved me."

From that moment the victory was hers. He forgot the words he had heard, he forgot that she had supplanted him, he could not believe that she had wilfully wronged him when he felt the touch of her soft arms. He was obliged to support her, or she would have fallen ; and as he tenderly carried her to the sofa, and then knelt

beside her and gazed into her face, he accused himself of having been harsh and cruel to her.

She was not in the least unconscious, and she gave him plenty of time to kneel and look at her in silent rapture. She knew that he was longing to kiss away the tears which still hung upon her long eyelashes ; but before that privilege could be granted to him she must feel that she was safe.

By-and-by she looked up at him suddenly with a swift shy glance, then hid her face in the pillow of the couch and stole her hand into his.

"Speak to me, Cissy," he whispered.

"I wanted to test your love," she answered ; and he had to bend down to catch her words. "I wanted to see how much you could forgive. Was it very wrong?"

His arms were round her even while she was speaking, and he held her close to

his heart. She made no resistance, and he kissed the lips which had just lied to him, and which would often lie to him again.

"How much I could forgive!" he said, repeating her words. "Oh, my darling, forgive me for doubting you, and tell me with those dear lips that you will soon be my own, my wife."

"I am your own," she answered; "and if I am not to be your wife, no one shall ever call me so."

The die was cast, the victory was won; she had not lost the coveted wealth. The means she had taken to secure it would never be known; but she must bring herself to call her cousin husband. At eighteen her liberty would have to be given up and the brilliant future resigned which her splendid inheritance would have secured for her; and, worse than all, she would have to feign love and hide hatred until exposure was quite impossible. Once married to

Edgar, the fact that she was his wife would seal his lips securely for ever. No man would put it into the power of the world to say, "You knew what she was, why did you marry her?"

CHAPTER IV.

IT had grown quite dark before Edgar could bring himself to leave Cecilia alone. It was to him, poor young fellow, such pure and perfect happiness to pour out the long pent-up love of his heart, to sit with her hand clasped in his, gazing unchecked into her beautiful face, and to call her over and over again his "darling," his "own perfect love," and to tell her how glad he was that he had been disinherited, as it had proved to him the disinterestedness of her affection. With the illogical reasoning of a lover, he totally ignored the fact that he had actually found her gloating over the ring which she had led his mother to believe he had stolen,

and had heard her thanking it for having gained a fortune for her.

He saw her carelessly drop the diamond out of sight into her jewel-case, and he knew by instinct that the fact of its resurrection was not to be mentioned to Mr. Calvert or the lawyer. But of what account was a mere diamond when Cecilia had promised to be his wife?

When at last she was alone again, it was sad to see that young and lovely girl give way to an outburst of anger and despair, which for the time distorted her too perfect face, and deprived her of every particle of beauty.

"Fool that I was!" she said, "not to know that he was capable of coming to spy upon me! Can it be that I am to spend my life as Mrs. Westbrook? As Miss Calvert, with £30,000 a year, I could have made my way into the most exclusive society in England; as Mrs. Westbrook no one will notice me or care for my money, and

worse, far worse than all, I must spend every hour of my life with a man who has not even sense enough to know when he is being fooled !”

She lay awake the greater part of the night, revolving in her clear and restless brain schemes for escaping from the net into which she had been entangled; but, one by one, each plan had to be given up as utterly hopeless. She was not to be of age until her eighteenth birthday, which was still six months off, and until she came into full possession of her property she was helpless. She knew that if she threw her cousin over, even his love for her would scarcely keep him from betraying her; and if her father were to know what she had done, he would insist upon full restitution being made to Edgar.

She thought of making a compact with the infatuated youth, to allow her to make him a handsome allowance and to separate from him after the marriage cere-

mony. He would then be assured that as long as he lived she could not marry; but then to make such an arrangement of value to her, he must be induced to allow her to retain her maiden name, for she could not gain in the least by being known as a Mrs. Westbrook who lived apart from her husband. But she was obliged to give up the idea as absurd. Having told Edgar that she loved him, how could she, in less than twenty-four hours, coolly propose to be his wife in name only? No, she felt that she had utterly compromised, and put herself into his power, and she could but trust to fate—fate she looked upon as the ruling power of the universe—to release her from the consequences of her folly. The folly, it may be as well to explain, lay in the simple fact that she had taken out the diamond ring without having first been careful to lock her door.

Towards morning she fell asleep, completely resigned to the inevitable, but with

the cruel hope in her heart that her unfortunate young lover might fall and break his neck before the wedding-day.

It is well that the thoughts in our minds so rarely find expression on our faces. Cecilia met her father and cousin at breakfast, looking so lovely, so innocent, and so happy, that Edgar gazed with idiotic rapture upon her radiant face, and even her father was struck by something unusual in her appearance.

"Why, Cissy dear," he said, "what has happened? You look beaming!"

"Has not Edgar told you?" she whispered shyly, and with a soft glance at the young man.

"I waited for you," he stammered, coming forward and taking her hand.

"You don't mean it? Is it really? My dear Cissy, I am so pleased," cried Mr. Calvert. "Edgar, my dear boy, anyone with half an eye could see what you wished ;

but Cecilia kept her secret only too well. When did it happen?"

"I think we—we have understood each other for a long time," Cecilia said, and she had the grace to blush as she spoke. "But I am afraid that horrid money would have stood between us if I had not let him see the truth last night."

A momentary pang shot through Edgar's heart. The lie had fallen gracefully from the lips of his idol, but it was a lie; and for an instant his heart turned from her, but his senses were too slavishly bound by her beauty to allow him to escape.

"She is so young," he said to himself, "and my own life has not been faultless. We must try to help one another to be better in every way."

It was not the first time that a yearning after what was good and noble had come to life in Edgar's heart, but such yearnings were now, for a time, to be repressed, and

allowed to wither for want of nourishment, only to awaken again to fresh vigour, and to lead him on, slowly but surely, out of darkness into the perfect day.

But before the dawning of that morn the martyrdom of his young life had to be gone through. He had still to see the breaking up of every cherished illusion, and to suffer keenly for having sacrificed the higher to the lower part of his nature. He had to learn that moral deformity and utter heartlessness could live and flourish under the most perfect exterior ever sent into this world to enthrall a man through his senses. He had to learn that he had been duped and cajoled, and to feel that by his death alone could he confer happiness upon the woman whom he loved even to the bitter end.

After the night which had been spent by Cecilia in vain attempts to plan a means of escape from the marriage with her cousin, she made up her mind to go

through with it resolutely. Her first act—and no one knew better how to do a thing of the kind with tact and grace—was to supply him plentifully with money. She had a faint hope that he might be seduced into gambling, and so give her a fair excuse for breaking with him. But she was disappointed; Edgar had forsworn cards and dice, and was never again seen under the influence of drink.

Then she arranged the time for the marriage. It was to take place early in the new year, soon after her eighteenth birthday; and she told her lover that it would gratify her if he would travel during the interval. She praised his artistic taste, which was really very good, but quite uncultivated; and she suggested that he should choose some cameos for her, and other objects of art in Italy. She knew, she said, that she could trust to him to make a far better selection for her than she was capable of doing for herself; but

her real object was to get rid of him, even for a time.

Who could tell what would happen in four or five months? But if in her cold little heart there was a wish that he might be killed in a railway accident, or carried off by brigands and shot before his beloved and devoted Cecilia could pay his ransom, it was, of course, never for a moment suspected by her friends. She inclined more to the idea of the capture than to the common-place, prosaic railway accident. She pictured herself making a sensation in the world as the beautiful heiress, Miss Calvert, whose lover had been shot by brigands while she was on her way to pay his enormous ransom. Such a romantic incident would add immensely to her prestige as an heiress.

But romance did not make her forget business. Her father and the lawyer were quite surprised at the aptitude she showed for it. She had the house and furniture

in Dorset Square sold, and she took on lease a small but very pretty little mansion in Rutland Gate. She would be only a nobody, to be sure, a mere Mrs. Westbrook, upon whom no one in society would call; but at least it was in her power to live in a fashionable quarter. By-and-by she might get into society, and then she could move into a larger house and give dinner-parties and balls. But she had very little hope of being able to make her way into the world of fashion. Her father belonged to an old county family; but Edgar's father had been in trade, and Edgar himself was not in any way remarkable. If he would but write a book, or discover a new planet, or make himself a name in some way or other, she might with her money do the rest. But still she would be only Mrs. Westbrook, and she had hoped to see half the peerage, and even princes, at her feet. Had she not both beauty and money?

It was strange that, while Cecilia was thus doggedly preparing for what she called the sacrifice of herself, Edgar should have made the acquaintance of a lady in Florence, who could, without any difficulty, have introduced his wife into the charmed circle of what, in the slang of the day, is called the "upper ten."

It had been in Edgar's power to render a slight service one morning to an elderly lady, an Englishwoman, whom he met in one of the galleries at Florence. She gave him her name, Lady Olivia Forrester, told him where she was staying with her maid, and it chanced that he was in the same hotel. They soon became intimate; and ere long the old woman won the confidence of the young man.

Never before had he found anyone to whom he could talk with such perfect unreserve. He could never have asked Cecilia to listen to his ideas and doubts upon religious matters—indeed, he had

hardly dared to dwell upon them in his own mind. But they were discussed at length with his kind new friend, and he owned that her clear and calm good sense was the means of dispersing many a cloud. Lady Olivia was peculiar in manner, being abrupt and brusque, and, in the opinions of those who did not know her well, ill-mannered and even rude. She hated shams of all kinds, and her unswerving love of truth had made her many an enemy. She was wont to say that she could hold her tongue, but that she could not tell a lie.

As a matter of course, she very soon found out that her young friend was passionately in love ; but when she heard that he was going to be married at twenty-three she shook her head and told him candidly he was a fool. He showed her a photograph of Cecilia ; but she did not like the face, although she saw its great beauty, and she gave it back to him without a word. He

had told her that the girl was an heiress ; but somehow his story had seemed all a muddle and jumble to the matter-of-fact old lady, which was not much to be wondered at, as it was impossible for Edgar to divulge the secret of the ring and of his disinheritance.

"It appears to me," Lady Olivia had said, "that you ought to have had your mother's money, but that this cousin of yours has it all, and that you are dependent upon her. It may be all right, but it does not seem so to me."

"There are some circumstances of an entirely private nature," Edgar had said.

"And I am an impertinent old woman for having made any remarks about it." Lady Olivia interrupted his explanation with her usual abruptness. "My brother—he is young enough to be my son, by the way—says that my spirit of research, as he calls it, will get me into trouble some day ; but remember I never ask questions unless

I am interested in the people of whom I ask them. You must forgive me, too, for not getting into raptures about that picture. She looks to me more like a woman of forty than a girl of eighteen—I mean in expression. I have no doubt she is charming, and I hope she will make you happy. But you are too young to marry. I hope my brother will not marry until he is past thirty.”

The quaint old lady and young Westbrook met every day during the month that Edgar stayed in Florence, and, as a matter of course, he mentioned Lady Olivia Forrester in his letters to Cecilia. But she had heard the name before; in fact, Beauwood Chase, Lord Forrester's place, was within a walk of Calvert Hall, and she found that her father knew Lord Forrester intimately. All this information made Cecilia very bitter.

“But for that wretched Edgar,” she said, “I might have been Lady Forrester some day.”

She would have been very angry had she known that Lady Olivia would not promise to call upon her.

"I am very little in London," she had said, in reply to Edgar's eagerly expressed hope that he might one day have the pleasure of introducing his wife to her. "And young women do not like me, as a rule. My ways do not suit them; but I hope to see you sometimes, my boy. You are but a boy to me, you know, younger than my brother."

And thus Edgar was made to understand that, although Lady Olivia would be always kind and friendly to him, she did not wish to be intimate with his wife.

A week before Christmas, he was in England again, not having fallen a victim to railway mismanagement or Italian brigands; and he looked so much older and more manly than he had done when he went away, that even Cecilia could not help acknowledging the improvement.

The second week in January she became Mrs. Westbrook ; and, by her desire, she and her husband went abroad at once to spend the rest of the winter and all the spring at Nice. And it was at Nice that they casually fell in with Lady Olivia Forrester, who was on her way to join her brother in a trip to Egypt and the Holy Land. Cecilia's delight in thwarting her young husband, and her own great desire to make a friend of a woman of Lady Olivia's rank clashed unpleasantly ; but the old lady's freezing demeanour towards her settled the point, and she declared that the "impertinent old creature should never have an opportunity of snubbing *her* again !"

CHAPTER V.

POOR Edgar's dreams of happiness with his beautiful wife ebbed away but too fast. Every day and all day long she wearied him with her caprices and by exhibitions of her imperious temper. She had by nature too strong a will to allow herself to commit the vulgar folly of getting into passions ; but she assumed and cultivated a haughty and domineering manner towards her husband which made him an object of pity and contempt when, as often happened, she treated him to a public exhibition of it.

But nothing she said or did seemed to have the power of killing his love for her. And now and then when, for the mere

pleasure of seeing her power over him, she would melt into a sudden display of tenderness, and lure him on to show the depth and fervour of his love, he would almost frighten her by the intensity of his devotion.

But her enjoyment of such wild adoration never lasted long. She knew that in his place she could not have loved a woman who had been guilty of such foul play as she herself had been, so she soon began to despise the unhappy young man as heartily as she disliked him.

Meanwhile, the possession of her wealth made her happy. It was beyond measure delightful to a woman of her vain and luxurious nature to be able to gratify every whim. Her carriage, her horses, her dress, and her beauty made men admire and women envy. But still she knew she was a mere nobody, only Mrs. Westbrook.

The English families whom she longed

to know took no notice of her, and she kept aloof from the Smiths and Jones's, who would gladly have made her acquaintance. She was very ambitious; and if the best society was not open to her, she would not mix with a lower grade.

She became intimate with one French family, probably induced thereto by the fact that Edgar disliked them. The Countess de P. had a reception once a week; but the beautiful Madame Westbrook was the only English lady whom she knew. Good music and a little high play formed the amusements of the evening in the Countess's salons, and Cecilia was introduced into the mysteries of the latter by a young Hungarian nobleman, Prince Michael Petöfi, who was as notorious in Nice for his extravagance and voluptuous habits as the young Englishwoman was for her beauty and her wealth.

The Prince was for some time under the impression that Cecilia was a widow, and

he very quickly made up his mind that she was pre-eminently well fitted to become Princess Petöfi. Great, therefore, was his mortification to find that the slight, delicate-looking young man with whom he one day met her out driving was her husband.

"I could blow him from my finger," was the contemptuous comment of the magnificent young aristocrat. He spoke English and French almost as well as his own tongue, and he preferred English, because, as those who did not like him averred, it was so easy to swear in!

Mrs. Westbrook was alternately fascinated and repelled by the handsome Hungarian. Her vanity was gratified by his admiration and by the extravagant compliments which he paid her; but his fierce eyes and his great height—he was several inches over six feet—and size frightened her. She had an almost superstitious dread of big men, for which she could not give a logical reason.

But even while she congratulated herself upon having brought this high-born adorer to her feet, she had no intention whatever of compromising herself for his sake. All her future—if Edgar would but be good enough to die—depended upon the rectitude of her conduct during his life. Until her ambition was fully gratified, she must keep her reputation free from stain or flaw. So when the attentions of the Prince became too marked, and his intentions unmistakable, she suddenly invoked the protection of her husband, and begged to be taken back to England at once.

Petöfi was furious; he had quite made up his mind to carry her off with him to Austria, and he was the more wroth because, up to a certain point, she certainly had given him encouragement. He followed her to England, but in London, as might be expected, he lost all trace of her. His name, and his position at the Austrian Court, gave him access into the very

best society, and in society, as yet, Mrs. Westbrook had no place. She read the Prince's name in the Court Journal, and other fashionable papers; but, as a matter of course, she never met him anywhere, and she gradually slipped out of his mind.

It may perhaps be thought strange that she did not make use of her money to force herself into notice; but a spurious notoriety was not her object. She wanted to be sought after, not merely tolerated as the rich wife of a man whom nobody wished to know. She could not divest herself of the impression that, while she was still young and beautiful, Edgar would leave her free to carry out her ambitious designs, and she was too wise to let herself be talked about too soon.

So she forced herself to bear a life of the strictest seclusion, and she bore it bravely. Her love of hearing good music was the only luxury she allowed herself, and she had a box at both the Opera houses;

but she always went dressed in the plainest manner, and sat hidden behind the curtains, sometimes alone, sometimes with Edgar, who was only too happy to be allowed to accompany her.

I have justly used the expression "allowed," for day by day, and hour by hour, the husband and wife drew farther and farther apart. The barrier had arisen slowly but surely. Edgar was by nature extremely sensitive and refined, Cecilia's refinement was altogether acquired, and the natural bent of her mind was not improved by the books she read in both French and English. But she was too clever to let the world know how thoroughly she understood and enjoyed descriptions and allusions which would have shocked a really pure-minded woman. With her husband it was not necessary to keep up appearances, and she would read aloud to him passages from her favourite authors which would bring a blush to his face, and when, in answer

to his gentle, loving entreaties that she should refrain from indulging in such mental poison, she would laugh him to scorn, and he would undergo misery unspeakable at the thought of how he had been deceived, and his whole life blighted by the fascinations and wicked schemes of one whom it was still his weakness to love, although respect had long since died out.

They had been just two years married, and every fond illusion he had cherished about her had been rudely scattered, when he met with a severe accident which caused a most painful lameness to set in, and which permanently weakened his health.

Cecilia had then an opportunity given her to undo all the misery she had caused him, but she simply ignored all wifely duty, left him to the care of servants, and most thoroughly enjoyed the freedom from even the slight restraint which his pre-

sence imposed upon her. She had a suite of apartments fitted up for him on the ground floor of the house, and removed from her own rooms up-stairs everything, even to the smallest book, that belonged to him, and when he grew better, and was able to walk about with a stick, she coolly suggested that it would be a trouble to him to mount the stairs, and that the arrangement she had made when the accident occurred had better stand. He made no objection, although he felt the banishment keenly, and so the husband and wife were virtually separated.

It was then, during the long hours of the sad and lonely days, and the often wakeful hours of the night, that all mists and doubts finally cleared away from Edgar's mind, and he found the deep and consoling peace which he had sought for in vain in the love of a cold, heartless, and worldly woman. It was a time of bitter trial and temptation to the unhappy

youth. His weak human nature clung to the love which had tempted him to condone the fault, if not the crime, of the woman he loved, and he hated himself for the eagerness with which he listened to the light footfall, and the rustle of the dress which announced that his beautiful young wife was coming to pay him her brief daily visit. He was ashamed of the wild longing that possessed him to lay his weary head upon her shoulder, and to hear from her lips one kind and loving word.

But her visits grew shorter and shorter. They gave him sharp pain ; they were so unlike what he would have had them, and to her no pleasure. She had no motive now to play the hypocrite, and there was not an idea in common between the ill-matched pair. She would offer to read to him, but would shrug her shoulders when she saw the open Bible upon his couch, and laughingly declare that it was not in her line.

Then, after a few idle words, she would go back to her own rooms and to whatever occupation she had in hand, glad that an irksome duty was over for four-and-twenty hours. She did not spend her days unprofitably, in one sense of the word, for, ever looking forward to the time of her entrance into society, she was determined to become as accomplished as she was rich and beautiful.

She had masters for languages, music, and drawing; and although her talents were not remarkable, perseverance did wonders for her. She worked very hard, and read so indefatigably that she was soon perfectly acquainted with the best and worst modern literature of the day. She made dress a study, too; but her own natural taste was a far better guide to her than any treatise could have been. And so time went on until she had been nearly five years Mrs. Westbrook, and was in her three-and-twentieth year. Then she saw

before her suddenly the fruition of all her hopes and schemes. Edgar caught a low fever; and after an illness of several weeks, dangerous symptoms began to develop themselves.

Then it was that his wife had the tan laid down in the street, that she employed a professional nurse, sent for her father and mother to come and be near her at her "approaching trial," and had doctor after doctor to prescribe for the man whose death she longed for as she had never yet longed for anything except wealth. She had always disliked him—first, because he was his father's heir, and then because he was to her an ever present reminder of the act she had been guilty of, in order to ensure his disinheritance. She even persuaded herself that but for him the necessity would not have been forced upon her to commit that act, which was true enough in one sense. And then marriage with him had been simply five years of miserable

and hateful bondage—although she had contrived to make it marriage in name only for the past three—and she could not but admit that, during those five years, her beauty had matured to absolute perfection, while her enforced seclusion had been turned to good account in the cultivation of her mind.

The death of Edgar has been already described, and about him nothing now remains to be told except that a short time before his last illness began he renewed his acquaintance with Lady Olivia Forrester. She was at Beauwood House in London on business for a few days, and she was about to join her brother for a final tour in Italy before they settled down to make their home in England.

Edgar called upon her, and the strange bond between the young man and the elderly woman was drawn very close during that brief intercourse which he felt sure would be their last; for he confided

to her more of his sad history than he had ever done before. Still it was impossible for him to tell her all; but at their last meeting he put a closed letter into her hand and said—

“You have told me frankly enough that you are sure my marriage has been an unhappy one, and I have not denied it in words; but I cannot tell you how it came about that a woman so young, beautiful, and rich agreed to marry such a poor creature as I am. I have, however, told you everything in that letter, and for what you will probably call a childish reason. I have a presentiment that you and my wife will one day come into contact in society, and that the knowledge which that letter will give you will enable you to hold her back from doing some great wrong to one whom you love. They say people whose days are numbered have sometimes the gift of second sight. I can tell you only my vague impressions. Perhaps some day

your brother and my wife may meet, and he may want to marry her ; if so, read that letter, and, if you see fit, use your knowledge to stop a marriage which might not make him happy ; but if it happens that you and she are never brought into contact in any way, burn the letter unopened for my sake. Remember that I, whom you have been kind enough to call friend, loved her very dearly, loved her even to the end."

That interview took place about three months before Edgar's death, and Lady Olivia was back in England with her brother when she read the announcement in the *Times*. They were at Beauwood Chase in S——shire ; but on their way thither from Folkestone, Lord Forrester had proposed that they should stay for a few days at an hotel near R——, in Surrey, to enable him to have some fishing in that neighbourhood, and the sudden divergence from their direct route was the means of

bringing Lady Olivia into contact with one who was closely connected with Edgar Westbrook and his wife.

But in order to explain this more fully, I must, as it were, open my story in a fresh place and describe what took place at Calvert Hall and at the hotel above named during the few weeks that immediately preceded the death of Cecilia Westbrook's husband.

CHAPTER VI.

WE often hear a girl pitied for having no mother; but is she not equally to be pitied when she has a silly, indolent, careless mother who is incapable of winning her confidence upon any subject whatever, and by whom she is treated with a most injudicious mixture of petting and praising, snubbing and scolding?

Such a mother was Mrs. Calvert. She had been a great beauty, and handsome Tom Calvert, who had been obliged to leave the Household Brigade and to go into a marching regiment, he had run so heavily into debt, had fallen in love with her at a hunt ball to which he had gone, rather unwillingly, with his brother officers. His

regiment was quartered at the time in a well-known hunting county, and the hunt ball was the great event of the winter.

That particular festivity proved to be what some people would call the "turning point" in the life of pretty Julia Mortimer; but her marriage with Calvert simply turned her from a silly girl into a silly woman. Not that she made her husband unhappy, or behaved badly in any way; but she was merely, what so many women are, incapable of saying a sensible word, or of doing a sensible action.

The Calverts had a large family, of whom, as has already been told, one was adopted by her aunt, Mrs. Westbrook. At the date of her adoption, the troubles which afterwards came thick and fast at Calvert Hall were just beginning. Three or four years after his marriage, Mr. Calvert succeeded to the family property upon the death of his grandfather, and left the army to take up his position in S——shire as a country gentleman.

But he had never been prudent as regards money matters, and his wife thought four thousand a year perfectly inexhaustible; so, although they were in debt when they succeeded to the inheritance, they launched out into all manner of extravagances. Carriages, horses, seasons in town, a succession of visitors in the winter, with balls, private theatricals, and so on, soon involved them to a considerable extent, and by the time the second daughter, Helen, was sixteen, retrenchment had begun, and it was for ever being dinned into the ears of the beautiful young girl how fortunate her sister Cecilia had been, and that she must also marry early and marry well for the benefit of her family, that is, for the benefit of the young sisters who were then wearing out her old dresses and picking up their education hap-hazard, as she had done.

Helen was not, by any means, either stupid or indolent, but the succession of

inefficient and ill-paid governesses, under whom she was placed, made the pursuit of knowledge hateful to her, and their slovenly efforts to cram her with accomplishments, would have been signal failures had not the girl herself been by nature quick and clever:

But when she was sixteen, Mrs. Calvert decided that she was "finished," and Helen saw the last of the "incapables" depart without a sigh; then, with all the ardour of youth, she determined to study hard by herself, but in a few weeks her enthusiasm waned and died out. There were a great many valuable old books in the library at Calvert Hall, and upon them Helen feasted without stint; but the authors she chose were principally poets, and the only novels that had any charm for her were those of Scott. Over and over again she read his historical romances, and from them, and from the poets whom she loved, her naturally pure mind received no taint.

I have already said that Mrs. Calvert alternately snubbed and petted her second daughter. Every thought of her vain and foolish heart was centred upon Cecilia, who had, as the mother expressed it, "done so well for herself," and she often felt inclined to blame Helen for not having been adopted by a rich relation.

But her brief intervals of petting were, perhaps, more hurtful to Helen's character than her unkindness could ever have been, for the girl's disposition was far too sweet and amiable to be soured by caprice or neglect. When her mother was in good humour with her, she used to tell her that with her face and figure she must make a splendid match; and she would, besides, openly express her opinion that it mattered very little what the husband was like personally if only he were rich and in a good position.

So time went on. Life at Calvert Hall was dull and stupid beyond measure, but

the embarrassments had decidedly grown less. Cecilia was now nearly five years married, Helen was within a few months of eighteen, and Mrs. Calvert began to talk, sometimes with pleasure and sometimes with reluctance, of bringing her out at the county ball, which always took place before Christmas.

But that grand event being still nearly eight months distant, Helen thought but little of it, and she went on dreaming over her favourite poems and romances until, in the early part of the month of May preceding the death of her brother-in-law, Edgar Westbrook, fate threw into her way Captain Frederick Percival, and her acquaintance with him as effectually changed the whole course of her thoughts and of her life as if she had been born into a new world.

There was a lonely and well shaded path by the river A—— which formed for a mile or two the boundary of part of Mr.

Calvert's grounds; and in spring and summer time Helen was wont to escape from the worries of her uncongenial home to that sweet quiet spot by the water side. She was sure to be altogether free there from the noisy companionship of her little brothers and sisters; for since one of the former had fallen headlong into the river and been all but drowned, Mr. Calvert had forbidden his younger children to go near that part of the grounds. Helen was, of course, not included in the prohibition, and she fell into far greater peril than her little brother had ever done.

Percival did not even know of her existence when he, one afternoon in the first week in May, trespassed, fishing-rod in hand, upon Mr. Calvert's grounds and came upon her suddenly as she sat under a tree, absorbed as usual in a book. Even dressed as she was in a shabby and ill-made dress, she was much too lovely to escape the notice of a man like Percival;

and he contrived to open an acquaintance with her by apologising for his intrusion, and by asking a few questions about the fishing, and particularly how leave to fish in that special part of the river was to be obtained.

Helen was not the least shy; she told him that the river just there belonged to her father—Percival, who knew well enough where he was, guessed at once that she was a daughter of Tom Calvert's—and that she was quite sure “papa” would give him leave to fish as often as he liked.

Percival thanked her with great warmth, but assured her that he was not enthusiastic enough about the sport to trouble Mr. Calvert, that he might never come to the place again, his movements were so uncertain. And with such a bow as poor Helen had never before received, he took himself away, and she, really and truly unconscious of the admiration she had excited, thought no more of him, and

did not even mention to her father that she had met him.

The following afternoon he appeared again, and told her that as she had been kind enough to say that he was not trespassing, might he make that pretty path by the river a short cut to —, he mentioned the place to which he was bound, and could she tell him if in that wood close by a certain fern grew? He had promised, if possible, to send a specimen to a friend of his. The excuse seemed perfectly valid to innocent Helen, who not only knew the fern, but the exact spot in which it grew. Should she go and find it for him? With pleasure, if she would allow him to carry her book for her.

So it began, and before the fern hunt was over, Percival knew exactly what her home life was, and he laid his plans accordingly. He was an adept in the art of planning, and poor Helen could not have fallen into more unscrupulous hands; and

yet Captain Percival was looked upon in society as a man of honour. And so he was, as society understands the term. He would not be guilty of cheating at cards; but he would seduce a wife under the roof of her husband, and he thought it would be no harm whatever to carry off a girl like Helen Calvert from her father's care.

He was the only son of the Hon. Guy Percival, who lived about half a dozen miles from Calvert Hall; and when he saw Helen for the first time, and began to lay his plans for her capture, he was staying with his father, as was his dutiful custom when he had nothing better to do. He was a selfish and heartless man, living for enjoyment only, and decidedly of opinion that other people, notably pretty women, had been sent into the world to minister to his pleasure. But his education and training were almost wholly to blame for his faults. His father had taken but

little interest in him ; and up to the age of one-and-twenty he had been kept in leading strings by his mother and her spiritual advisers. She had been a rigid and bigoted Roman Catholic.

But when he came of age, he threw off his allegiance to both mother and priests, and started in life as a nominal member of the Church of England, and an officer in the ——nd Life Guards ; but his career in the army was a short one, for, as so often happens, his means and his expenditure did not keep pace, and he had to sell out. Then for years he lived what might be called the life of a fashionable adventurer. He was a member of one or two expensive clubs, he was always pretty well mounted in the park, but he was the intimate friend of many who, although well born, seemed rather to hover upon the skirts of good society than to be actually in it ; and his character did not stand very high, for a man is generally judged by his associates.

Still he was invited to many of the very best houses, and he was a universal favourite with women, because they knew, by that free-masonry which exists between them, that no matter what secret concerning them came to his knowledge they were perfectly safe. He might steal away a woman's honour, but he would never boast of the fact.

More than once he had been on the point of marriage with an heiress, whom he had beguiled with his fluent tongue and but too ready assumption of the character of a devoted lover; but when the question of settlements came to be discussed, his prospects were so uncertain that the affair invariably fell through. There were four obstacles between him and a very brilliant position, the lives of two old men—his father and an uncle, and the lives of two cousins not many years older than he was himself; but he seemed very indifferent about the future, and lived on in his own

careless, selfish fashion, and had he been asked the question, would have said that he was perfectly happy.

It is hardly necessary, I suppose, to explain that Captain Percival did not intend to ask Helen Calvert to marry him; but, although he knew the position which the girl's father held in the county, he intended to induce her to elope with him, trusting that her family would be discreet enough to hush up the affair, and to receive her at the Hall as if she had been away upon a harmless visit—such things had happened before, and why should they not happen again?

But he was obliged to be very cautious in his advances with her. He saw at once that she did not look upon him as a lover, and her frank trust in him, and her girlish pleasure in his admiration, made him hold back a little in the pursuit of his designs: Not that he had any of that awe-struck respect for innocence which is so common-

ly and falsely attributed to men of the Percival type; he would have infinitely preferred to Helen a woman of the world, who saw through his object from the first, and who was ready to meet him half way. It was just possible that Helen might fall seriously in love with him, and by so doing complicate matters extremely; but still she was much too pretty to be given up.

“Why do you never come up to the Hall?” she asked him suddenly one afternoon. They had now been meeting almost every day for a fortnight, and they were sitting together as usual under a tree. He was always ready with some excuse when she suggested the propriety of telling her father about her acquaintance with him, and as she could not now confess without awkwardness that she had already known him for some time, she agreed that it would be better to go on as she had begun. But the secret troubled her, and on this particular afternoon she interrupted her com-

panion in the middle of a glowing account of a polo match at Brighton, to ask why he never came up to the Hall.

"Oh, I don't care for visiting," he answered, "and it is twice as jolly to meet you out here."

"But it seems odd," the girl went on, "never to meet you anywhere but here. When people like one another——"

"But I do not *like* you, Helen," Percival interrupted—he had called her by her Christian name almost from the first—with a marked emphasis on the word.

Helen turned her sweet face towards him with a puzzled expression in her eyes; he shifted his seat closer to her in an instant, and put his arm round her waist.

"And do you really think I have come here every day to sit with you because I liked you?" he whispered. "No, my sweet one; I came because I love you, and you know it, you little witch!"

Then he used his strength to turn her

averted face towards him, and kissed her on the lips.

"No, no," she cried, pushing him away from her, "I did not know it. I never thought of such a thing, and now you have spoiled all my pleasure."

"Oh, you little innocent!" he said, laughing, and still holding her fast. "There, now, be quiet, and there shall be no more spoiling, as you call it, until you give me leave."

"Let me go!" she cried, entreatingly. "Pray let me go, I must go home; indeed I must."

"Then go, you unkind, cruel girl," he said, releasing her suddenly. He was on his feet in a moment, and held out his hand to help her up; but she stood still, blushing and trembling, unwilling to go, and yet afraid to stay. "Good-bye," he said, taking off his hat with elaborate politeness. "If I knew how to make a fine speech, I might try to apologize to you for having been

carried away by my feelings ; but I really did not imagine that my pleasant little companion of the last fortnight was so hard-hearted."

"You are laughing at me, and you are angry," she cried, piteously, stung by the mockery she detected in his voice. "Oh, pray do not be angry!"

"Good-bye," he repeated, and half turned away lest she should see the smile of triumph on his lips. He walked on for a few yards, and then turned to see the effect of his desertion ; it was just what he had anticipated, Helen had thrown herself on the ground again, and was crying bitterly, with her face hidden.

He stole back, and kneeling beside her, he whispered, in the low, tender tone which had conquered many a more experienced woman,

"My darling, I am a brute to make you cry ; look up at me and say you forgive me."

She looked up, with her beautiful eyes still dimmed with tears. The glance was almost pathetic in its innocent sweetness, and it touched the hardened man of the world against his will.

"My little one," he said, "I would not hurt you on any account ; see how you can trust me." He raised her little hand to his lips and kissed it reverently ; as he did so, a lovely colour flushed all over Helen's face.

"And you really like me in—in that way?" she said, shyly.

"If 'that way' means better than I like any other girl in the whole world, I can safely answer yes," he said, glibly ; "but I am so afraid of vexing you that I am not going to talk about anything but the weather until you give me leave."

Poor innocent Helen, she was like wax in his skilful hands ; but never did conqueror show more skill in his treatment of a captive than did Percival in his treat-

ment of her. He knew well enough that if he had not actually won her heart that afternoon, he had made her feel his power, and that from henceforth she could not even look at him without a blush and a drooping of the eyelids. It would not be possible for her to forget that he had kissed her, and he was determined to make her show plainly that his caresses were welcome before he acknowledged that it gave him pleasure to bestow them.

They sat on together under the tree by the river side for fully another hour, and she listened almost in silence to his delicately veiled compliments to her beauty, to his apparently diffident confession of admiration for it, and to his more openly expressed pleasure in his situation, away from all the world and by her side. Her brain was in a whirl as she sat drinking in the sweet and poisoned draughts.

Percival was the first to make a move.

"I must tear myself away from you," he

said, bending forward a little to smooth back a curl of her pretty hair which had fallen over her forehead, and he felt that she shivered under his touch. "Give me a word of praise before we part, pretty one. Have I not behaved well?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"And will you not meet me here to-morrow and give me my well earned reward, a kiss from those sweet lips? I long for it unspeakably now; but I must bear the punishment of my fatal presumption an hour ago. You have been very good to forgive me."

An anchorite might have been pardoned for forgetting his vows had he seen the lovely expression in the eyes which Helen suddenly turned upon her captor. Percival had to use all his self-control to force himself to leave her at the moment; but he went away resolutely.

"Little witch!" he said, as he walked home, "she shall learn what waiting

means; and by this time to-morrow she will be ready to follow me to Jericho if I ask her."

Let not any reader of the foregoing scene cry out that it is over-coloured or unnatural. Let any man of the world who may by chance read these pages deny if he can that he and his fellows do not lead on gentle, confiding, innocent girls to ruin without an iota of compunction, and without one particle of real love for their victims? Of course there are many willing victims; but with them I have nothing to do. And let women acknowledge, on their part, that they very often mistake gratified vanity for love, and have found out, when too late, that not only have they been mistaken as to the nature of their own feelings, but that they have received stones for bread.

As to the charge of coarseness and over-colouring in the descriptions of love scenes so often brought against writers of

the present day, I answer that the days of chivalry have long since passed away, and men do not now make love in the deferential manner which obtained in the days of our grandmothers. It is too much the fashion at the present time for girls to be addressed as if they were matrons, and matrons, too, of a somewhat "frisky" order. There is now much more sensuality in love than there is poetry and romance, and men and women have in consequence deteriorated visibly. Let us hope before the child maidens of to-day are women grown that the tide may have turned, that society may have grown sounder at the core, and that the polish of its surface will faithfully represent its internal purity.

Helen Calvert went home from that meeting with Percival a child no longer, and yet there was more fear than love in her heart for the man who had played with and tempted her. She was pos-

sessed, too, by a sort of vague wonder that she, who had so rarely been praised or made much of at home, should have had power to make him, a man belonging to the gay world, which she had never yet entered, spend hours in that quiet spot by the river. Why should he admire her, and care to talk to and to look at her with that strange expression in his eyes if he really did not, as he said, like her better than any other girl in the world?

She had not dared fully to meet that look she remembered so well; but surely she was bound to like him if only out of gratitude, and she thought that she must meet him on the morrow just to see if he were quite the same.

But with the morrow her courage had all ebbed away, and she could not go to the river side to meet her half-declared lover; it would look so bold, she thought, so unwomanly. The sunny afternoon passed away and found her still lingering

and wavering, and Captain Percival was enjoying his eight o'clock dinner with his father when she at last went down to the well-known spot.

It was silent and lonely, and there was nothing to tell her that he had been there to look for her. She stayed on and on until the grass was wet with dew and the mysterious twilight which gathers under trees began to close around her, and noises, unheard during the day, came from the depths of the wood and made her shudder. Then, with a white scared face, she rushed breathlessly home and spent the night reproaching herself for her unkindness, and wondering if she should ever see him again.

Determined to satisfy herself upon that point, Helen spent no time in wavering the following afternoon, and being first at the river side, she had to endure a tolerable share of the suspense which had fallen to the lot of Percival the day before.

But he came at last ; and before he and Helen parted, he had made her acknowledge that she had thought of little else but him since they had said good-bye.

CHAPTER VII.

THAT simple avowal was a great step gained, and it gave Percival very little trouble afterwards to persuade her that she was deeply in love with him. Still he had to play a careful and cautious game to avoid startling her; but step by step the way was cleared before him. He explained, with an amount of casuistry which was quite thrown away upon Helen, that her father would never consent to her marriage with a man who had not a certain position to offer her, and then brought to bear upon her the old argument that if she were to marry him secretly she might rely upon forgiveness when opposition was of no further use.

At first Helen utterly refused to listen to him, she wanted to have a gay, pretty wedding with a bevy of bridesmaids, and to go off for a long honeymoon; but she gradually gave way, and finally consented. Then the difficulty was how was she to get away; she never left home, and had, therefore, no excuse for absenting herself.

But circumstances were in Percival's favour. It was now June; Edgar Westbrook's illness had taken a serious turn, and Mr. and Mrs. Calvert went up to London to be near Cecilia. On hearing this welcome news, Percival lost no time in arranging with Helen what she was to do. There was a railway station within half a mile of Calvert Hall; she was to go there in time for an early train, take her ticket for London—of course she had no money, but her lover generously supplied the want—and he was to meet her as if by accident at a station a little farther

up the line. After that she was to leave everything to him, and to be quite sure that he had arranged for the marriage to take place as soon as possible. He did not think it necessary to explain that her ideas upon that subject were not precisely the same as his.

Nothing occurred to stop the infatuated girl; for is it not true that we very often find obstacles piling themselves up before projects which are not only blameless but laudable, while between us and the one false step which is to drag us down to destruction nothing intervenes? May not this be to try our power to resist temptation? Of course it will be said that the obstacles stand between us and destruction also, and that our inclinations beat down the barriers; but this is not always so, as many a humble Christian toiling on the narrow path will acknowledge.

In poor Helen's case it seemed as if

everything combined to throw her into Percival's power; and if she ever paused to think what she was doing, she comforted herself with much false and illogical reasoning.

"If I were doing very wrong," she often said to herself, "something would surely happen to stop me; and, after all, why should I not marry to please myself?"

Of course it would be too much to say that Helen believed that if she were doing wrong a miraculous hand would interfere to save her; but she did think that if she were not, as she fully believed, about to do the very best thing possible for herself and her family in planning to marry this devoted lover, her stolen meetings with him by the river side would have been found out, and prompt measures taken to put an end to them.

But it must be confessed that, having once consented to go with him, her time for reflection was short. When she was

at home, and unable to shut herself into her own room with a book, her time was spent in a succession of sharp encounters with her little brothers and sisters, whom she was expected to amuse and keep out of mischief. To amuse them would have been hard work, even if the task had been a congenial one to the girl whose head was full of romantic dreams of the happy life that was in store for her as Percival's wife. And to keep them out of mischief was quite impossible; so she must not be too severely blamed, poor child, for disliking her noisy, ill-regulated home, and for thinking every moment with redoubled pleasure of the sweet words and still sweeter caresses which Percival lavished upon her.

She thought but little of deceiving the careless mother who snubbed and kept her in the background; but her heart sometimes smote her when her father called her his "little Nellie," and petted her be-

hind his wife's back. More than once she thought of telling him of her lover ; but Percival's reasons for keeping silent had more weight with her than her desire for her father's approval. And thus it was, with a feeling half of pleasure and half of pain, that she saw him and her mother start for London, and began immediately to make her small preparations for her own journey.

She was not to leave until the following day ; but she had so much to do that the time did not seem long. She made arrangements to send all the children off for a picnic to the ruins of a Roman encampment which was about eight miles from the Hall, in charge of their old nurse and the housemaid. She asked the Rector's children to join the party, and there was immense fun over the preparations for the festivity. Helen made an excuse for not joining the party, which was very favourably received, for her

popularity in the nursery was intermittent, and the legend that "Nellie was cross" was so often circulated amongst the young rebels that she had no difficulty whatever in persuading them that they would get on much better without her.

With great satisfaction she saw all of them packed, with their hamper, into the waggonette the next morning at nine o'clock; and then, going to her own room, she put on her very best dress, a dark blue silk, which had been handed down from her mother's wardrobe, and carrying the little bag into which she put the few articles she thought it necessary to take with her, she started to walk to the station. A slight shade of regret had crossed her mind when she turned to take a last look at the little bedroom, which she believed she was leaving for ever. The many lonely hours she had spent there did not seem so unhappy now as they had done while they were being lived through;

but the thought that if she ever again stood there she should be a happy wife, *his* wife, whom no one could snub or scold, overcame all regret, and she hurried downstairs with a light heart, and presently she found herself at the little station without having met anyone whom she knew.

She took her ticket to London according to Percival's directions. He did not intend to take her there, she knew, but he had reasons which he had not explained to her for wishing to put her friends off the scent. She had scarcely begun to realize that she was actually on her way, when the train reached the next station, and there she found Percival waiting to join her. He treated her during the journey with the most respectful attention, he was tender without being demonstrative; and by the time they reached their destination, which was R——, in Surrey, she was perfectly at her ease with him, and was look-

ing forward with shy pleasure to the morrow. All the arrangements for the marriage were, he told her, completed, and until the happy moment came she was to trust herself implicitly to him. Not a doubt of his sincerity entered her mind.

They arrived at R—— about four o'clock. The day had been intensely hot, without even a floating cloud in the sky, and Helen felt tired and by no means so peaceful or happy as she had done a few hours before; indeed, she looked so agitated, and so much as if she were going to break down altogether, that Percival immediately proposed that she should lie down and rest for a little. She was with him in the pretty cool sitting-room, with French windows opening upon a balcony which overlooked the shady garden of the hotel, when he made the welcome proposition, and she accepted it so gladly that he was quite amused at her eagerness. She had never before been with him ex-

cept out of doors, and her ease of manner had altogether deserted her. When she left home she had not calculated upon the many hours which would have to pass before the wedding day; had they been travelling all the time she could have borne it so much better.

"You must have some tea," Percival said, patting her flushed cheek kindly; he knew well enough what was passing in her mind, and his object was to keep her quiet and unsuspecting, "and then lie down and rest until dinner-time; I have ordered it for eight o'clock——"

"But I am not to see you again until to-morrow, am I?" she interrupted. "I do not mind being alone."

"Oh, but we are going to dine together," he answered gaily. "That would be unkind of you, Nellie, to shut me out! Do not look so scared, little woman, or I shall think you are going to be unkind."

"And you do not think it is very wrong, do you?" she said, clinging to his arm—"I mean wrong for us not to have some one with us until we are married."

"Wrong? Why upon earth need we be bored with anyone?" he answered laughing. "We might have been married a year ago for anything the people here can tell. There, don't worry your silly little head!" He kissed her, and in another moment she was alone.

The tea he had ordered came in presently, and then she lay down to rest upon the sofa, which she drew up close to one of the windows, and presently she fell asleep. But before an hour had passed, the noise of an arrival in the passage outside her door aroused her; she heard the yapping of a little dog, and the somewhat sharp but still refined tones of a woman's voice, and then the sound of another female voice pitched in a low, respectful key. Once a man's

voice, singularly sweet and powerful, broke into the dispute, or discussion, and then all was still again.

But Helen could not sleep any more just then, so she walked restlessly about the room, went into her bedroom, which opened off the sitting-room, and which also had French windows, and a balcony overlooking the garden. There were no less than three doors in the bedroom, one was locked on the far side, the other led into the passage; she stood at it for a moment, looking out, and just opposite she saw another room, into which the hotel porters were carrying luggage. The little dog she had heard yapping a few minutes before made a rush at one of them; but a woman dressed in black made a rush at him, and captured him before he could do any mischief.

Feeling less lonely than she had done when she awoke, Helen went back into her room, and presently wandered out upon

the balcony. There she stood, leaning her arms upon the topmost bar, and looking out over the shady garden and the pretty country which was visible beyond the boundary wall. The scent of cigars came up to her ; there were two gentlemen sitting upon a rustic seat just under where she stood, and by leaning over a little she was able to see them ; one of them was a stranger, the other was Percival.

Her eyes rested upon him with a strange expression, in which there was a mixture of fear and that wistful expectancy with which a very young girl almost always regards the man she fancies she loves with all her heart. There is so much about him and his treatment of her which she cannot understand ; she is, if she is really innocent as well as young, so shy, and he is so bold, that even if, as is sometimes the case, she thinks he is absolutely faultless, she is more perfectly happy, and likes him better when he is away from her than when he is by her side.

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When Helen saw who was so close to her, she first drew back a little, then again she leaned forward cautiously to watch the familiar figure; it was so pleasant to her to look at him herself unseen, and to dream of the wonderful to-morrow, when she was to be his wife; so dreaming, she forgot the dread interval which had still to pass before to-morrow came.

Totally unconscious of wrong-doing in any shape, she stood there with her eyes fixed upon the two men. Her lovely face had never looked more beautiful; she had the most exquisite blue-grey eyes, with dark lashes and eyebrows, a fair, clear complexion, with a deep but delicate rose-bloom upon the cheeks, and, above all, covering a head of the most perfect shape, an abundance of fair brown hair; such a face has been seen in a picture of Titian's, but it is very rarely found in real life, unless made up by artificial colouring.

The two men were talking in low voices,

and laughing occasionally; suddenly Percival spoke in a louder key, and his words reached the unseen listener but too plainly; they were these—

“Of course I promised anything, everything, to get her here, but by this time to-morrow she will understand that marriage is impossible.”

“And then?” the other asked the question.

“And then? Oh! her people are in London, and do not know she has left yet; I must try to get her back before they get home, and if not, I must trust to their good sense not to make a row.”

“But, good heavens! Percival,” interrupted his companion, “you seem to me to be behaving like a scoundrel! You have not told me her name, and I do not want to know it, but if she is so charming, and a lady by birth, why not marry her?”

“Because she’s as poor as Job, my dear fellow!” answered Percival, calmly. “I

must marry money, two thousand a year is the very lowest figure. But what can I do? This girl is by far the prettiest thing I have seen for many a day, and very fond of me, poor little fool!"

So far Helen listened without moving a muscle, then she staggered—for she was hardly conscious of walking—back into the room; she felt as if she must cry out in her misery, but with a strong effort she controlled herself. To escape was her one clear idea, and as fast as her hands could move, she tied on her hat; then, taking up her little bag, which she had not yet unpacked, she opened the door softly, and went out into the passage.

But there she stopped. She knew where her home was, and the station she must go to in order to reach it by rail, but she was afraid to move, lest she should meet Percival. She might with perfect safety have gone along the passage, through the hall, and out of the front door, for he was still

smoking and chatting with his friend in the garden, and he had no intention of disturbing her until just before dinner; but her very eagerness to avoid him made her a coward, and hearing a step in the distance, she darted into the opposite room, the door of which was still open, and then, quite unable to stand, from fright and agitation, she threw herself down beside a couch at the foot of the bed, and began to cry.

The steps she had heard came nearer, they came into the room, and stopped beside her, but she did not dare to look up.

“Who are you, and what in the world are you doing here? How did you get into my room?”

The speaker was a tall old lady, with thin, sharp features; she had bright dark eyes, under rather heavy and still darker brows, but she wore her own grey hair under a quiet cap; her dress was black silk, thick and lustreless, and she wore

round her shoulders, in spite of the hot weather, a white shawl, made of some soft material. She seemed, in the eyes of poor frightened Helen, as she would have seemed in the eyes of nine people out of every ten, a severe-looking old woman.

CHAPTER VIII.

NO answer came from the figure huddled on the ground, and the old lady took her spectacles from her pocket, put them on, and peered down at the intruder.

"Upon my word," she said, after a pause, "this is about the oddest thing that has ever happened to me. I must call my brother."

She turned to leave the room again, but stopped even before Helen's words, imploring of her not to call anyone, had reached her.

"No, better not—better not," she muttered, half to herself. "You are right—better not bring a man in. Men only make complications. No doubt there is

one at the bottom of all this. Now tell me all about it," she added, suddenly sitting down on the couch beside which Helen had thrown herself.

"If I might shut the door," the poor girl whispered.

"Not much use, is it, unless we lock it too, I suppose," the old lady replied, getting up, and suiting the action to the word. "There, that stupid Dickens did not make those lazy porters unstrap my boxes. But I daresay we shall not be here more than a night, after all. Just a whim of Arthur's. And now I find a young mad woman in my room! There, now the door is locked," she continued, coming back to her seat. "You need not look at the window, young madam—I must have some air this hot day; and if you do not explain yourself directly, upon my word I must turn you out of my room. Come, now, who are you?"

"Oh!" cried Helen, clasping her hands

in despair, for the old lady was so fierce, "do not ask me who I am, but help me to get away from this—now, this moment. I do not know my way to the station, and I am so afraid of meeting him."

"Him? Who is he? I knew there was a 'him' about somewhere! What is he? Your father, brother, husband? Lover then?" She concluded her list of possible male relations with a snap, which showed that she believed lovers to be the root of all evil. "You wicked girl!" she went on. "You have been led astray with that face of yours, and now you want to get out of the scrape."

Helen sobbed so bitterly she could not speak.

"There now, don't cry your eyes out, but tell me all about it," the old lady said presently, touched by the grief of her strange visitor. "If you have done wrong, and are sorry, I must try to help you, if I can. When did you come here, and why

do you want to go? Now be sure you tell me the truth."

"I came this afternoon, and I thought I was to be married to-morrow; but I was on the balcony just now, and I heard him tell some other gentleman that he never intended to marry me at all, so I came in here to hide, because I thought I heard him coming."

Just then the handle of the door was rattled loudly, and a man's voice, the same which Helen had already heard talking to the two women while the boxes were being carried in, sounded outside.

"Olivia," it said, "what are you locked up for? Let me in, or come out to me. I am going for a walk."

"You can't come in, and I can't go out," the old lady answered. "I am much too busy. Go away."

"You have some one with you, I heard talking, and it is not Dickens."

But the old lady still called out "Go

away! go away!" and at last he went.

"That was my brother. Is it not fortunate that I locked the door? Now finish your story. You want to go home to your foolish mother—for she must be foolish not to have taken better care of you."

"It was my own fault," faltered Helen.

"Very likely; but had you been my daughter, this would not have happened. I wonder is she deceiving me?" she added, half aloud. "Perhaps she has been here for a week. Look at me," she said suddenly. "Take off your hat and turn to the light, and let me see you properly. Are you sure there is no reason why you should not go back to your father's house? Are you telling the truth when you tell me that you only left it this morning?"

"I am—indeed, indeed I am. Do not think I am wicked enough for that; but I think, if I had not run away this evening, I must have drowned myself to-morrow."

"Poor child! poor child!" said the old

lady, patting the drooping head kindly. "I believe you, and I wish you were safe out of this now. If my brother sees you he will want to horsewhip some one, and the less fuss there is made the better for you. *He* will hold his tongue, whoever he is, for fear of being laughed at. Do not tell me who he is. I know almost all the men, bad and good, in society, and if I were to meet him at a dinner-party by-and-by, what would happen? No, no, do not tell me any names—the less I know the less fear there will be of setting the farm-yard cackling! But we are losing time—it is past six o'clock. How are you to go home by yourself? Is it far away?"

Helen named the county.

"Why, if you leave by the next train, you cannot get there before eleven or twelve to-night, and what are you to do then?"

Helen explained that the station was very near her home, and that she could easily go alone.

“Pooh! nonsense, child! You would be seen, and there would be such a cackling about you all over the place that you might as well have stayed here with that man. No, Dickens must go with you—Dickens is my maid, and she is much kinder than I am, and it will be rather fun for her to be travelling all night—better fun than attending to me and Cato. Cato is my dog. Stay quiet now for a moment. I must consult the A B C. Yes, here it is—half an hour after the train you must go by reaches B——, the up-mail passes—that will do famously. Dickens can see you home. She need not tell me where it is, nor your name, if she finds it out, nor anything about you—far better for me not to know. I might meet your mother at dinner some day, and if so I could not help telling her that she did not take proper care of her daughter. Now I am going to call Dickens.”

She rang the bell and unlocked the door.

A kind and most sedate-looking elderly woman came in presently, leading a white dog in a string.

"Leave Cato with me," said her mistress, "and go and put on your bonnet directly, and get a warm shawl. I want you to take this young lady down to the B—— station by the express which passes the junction here at seven-thirty. You are to see her safe home, and then come back here by the up-train, which gets to B—— at twelve-thirty, you understand."

"Yes, my lady," replied Dickens.

"And, Dickens, you are not to ask any questions, remember. I do not know who this young lady is, and if you find out now, or at any future time, you are not to tell me; and if you hear anyone in this hotel wondering what has become of a young lady, you are still to be silent. Now, you quite understand?"

"Yes, my lady," said the woman again.

"Very well. Now go and get your bon-

net, as it is better for you to wait at the station than here; and you must contrive to look, when you leave the hotel, as if you were going for a walk. It would be better if you could take the dog; but I suppose you could not manage that easily."

"Not easily, my lady."

And then Dickens went for her bonnet, and her mistress, taking a thick gauze veil from her own bonnet, which was lying on the bed, made Helen tie it over her hat.

"Now if you should meet him, he will not know you with that mask on," she said. "And have you a shawl? No, I thought not; girls never think that it might be chilly of a summer's night. Now here comes Dickens. Dickens, make her eat some food on the way, or she'll have a fever or something when she gets home. Now go away with you!"

She waved her hand to Helen, who would fain have stopped to say a word of thanks,

opened the door, and shut them out into the passage. Hot as it was, Helen had covered her dress with the large shawl forced upon her by the old lady, and had pulled the thick veil over her face, but they did not meet anyone on their way out; the waiters were all taking advantage of a few unemployed hours to doze in shady passages; the young lady in the bar had fallen fast asleep over a novel in her parlour; the blazing sun upon the porch and front of the house had driven all loiterers into the shady garden, and Percival, as he sat on chatting to his friend, of course never imagined that the girl whom he had enticed from her home was escaping from him so easily.

About eight o'clock a tall, handsome young man came into the room in which Helen had taken refuge.

"Well, Olivia," he said, "you have not locked me out this time. Have you heard the news? There is quite a hubbub all

over the place. A young lady has bolted, as far as I can make out; she came here this morning with her husband—just newly married, they tell me—and now she can't be found."

"She came here with a scoundrel who pretended he was going to marry her to-morrow," replied the old lady; "but she found him out in time, and she is on her way home now with Dickens."

"With Dickens, of all people in the world! And how came you to find her out?"

"She found me out," replied his sister; and then she told him the whole story.

"Poor little thing, is she pretty?" was the young man's comment.

"I have no doubt you would think so," returned the old lady, in her brusque way, "and for that very reason I took care you should not see her."

"What! were you afraid of seeing her become Lady Forrester on the spot?"

Come now, Olivia, you are hard upon me ; am I given to fall in love so quickly ?”

“ There is no answering for the folly a man may be guilty of when he is looked at out of eyes which even I must admit to be the loveliest I have ever seen.”

“ Yes, but remember I have a foolish prejudice against women who run away with other fellows,” replied her brother ; “ and also remember that it is past eight, and I want my dinner.”

“ Come away, then ; I do not know what I look like. I dressed without Dickens for the first time this twenty years.”

Later in the evening, Lord Forrester went to the smoking-room, and when he joined his sister again, he said,

“ I met Frederick Percival just now, and asked him to come down and shoot in October, but he says he’s engaged.”

“ That’s the man !” interrupted Lady Olivia, almost upsetting her coffee-cup in her excitement. “ I hope he will not

come to Beauwood while I am there."

"Do you mean the man from whom your pretty friend ran away? Oh, impossible—that is not his line at all; besides, I fancied that she had been entangled with some cad or other."

"Oh!" replied Lady Olivia; but the single word said more for her opinion of Captain Percival than a whole volume could have done.

Arthur Vandelure Forrester, sixteenth Earl Forrester of Beauwood Chase in S——shire, and Beauwood House, Park Lane, was just then nine-and-twenty, and about thirty years younger than his half-sister, the Lady Olivia Forrester. She was the only child of her father's first marriage, and when the baby-heir was put into her arms by his fast-dying mother, the girl's heart—she was past the pride of her youth then—went out most lovingly to the poor little fellow, and with as much affectionate pride as his own mother could have felt,

she watched him grow from a pretty child into a tall handsome lad.

She stood beside him when, on the day he came of age, he received the congratulations of his tenants and friends—his father had died some years before—and from that hour she had remained his constant companion, and the young man returned her more than sisterly love with a devoted affection which was the pride and comfort of her life.

They were admirably suited to each other. As she grew old certain peculiarities of manner became habitual to her, but she had aged, and they had grown so gradually that she was half unconscious of the changes in herself. She was naturally clever, and she had read and studied much, in order to make herself companionable to her young brother when he grew to manhood; but she had not confined herself to the study of books only, she went much into society, and her keen insight into

character, and her power of adapting herself to the many varieties of the human family with whom she was thrown, gave her thoughts and conversation a brighter tone than could be found in the thoughts and conversation of many of her contemporaries ; “women who married and rusted,” she was wont to say, for, like many clever maiden ladies, she was inclined to be rather hard upon men, and to despise women who married.

Even her brother got pulled up smartly sometimes, if he showed an inclination to swerve a hair's breadth from his usual calm, common-sense view of things. But it must not be supposed that this apparently acquiescent young man was under the thumb of his sister ; far from it ; Lord Forrester had a will of his own, and a very strong will on some points, and no one knew better than did Lady Olivia when opposition to him on her part should cease.

He was very much amused with her for the part she had played in the affair of poor Helen. He treated the matter far more lightly than Lady Olivia was inclined to do, and she at last told him, quite angrily, that he was very inconsistent, and only defended the girl's folly because she did not belong to him.

Lady Olivia was really very much interested in the poor frightened girl who had appealed so touchingly to her for protection, and with very natural curiosity she wished to know the name of the runaway; but her sense of honour made her refrain from any attempt to find it out, and long before the return of her staid waiting-woman she had settled in her own mind how to parry the anxiety which, she had no doubt, Dickens would feel to impart to her mistress all the information she had gathered upon her journey.

The fact that the home of the beautiful young stranger was in the same county

with Beauwood Chase had strengthened Lady Olivia in her resolution to remain ignorant of her name. "Such things do not happen by chance or without a purpose," she said to herself, as she again struggled through her toilette without the help of Dickens. "And I am sure to stumble upon that poor pretty little fool again somewhere."

When Dickens re-appeared, her mistress had no fault to find with her upon the score of garrulity; she said simply, "I saw the young lady home, my lady," and there the matter dropped.

And the abrupt disappearance of Helen from the hotel caused but temporary excitement. If Captain Percival was surprised, or put out by the occurrence, he was too much a man of the world to set speculation afloat by making an undue fuss about it, and it never for one moment occurred to him that old Lady Olivia Forrester, who was, he heard, at the hotel with her brother, was mixed up in the affair.

He went back to town feeling very much disgusted, and rather small, it must be confessed, at having been thrown over by a little country girl, but he consoled himself by the reflection that he might have got into trouble with her friends.

It was not until she found herself at B—— Station with Dickens at midnight, that the difficulty of accounting for her absence during the day, and for her arrival at such an unseemly hour alone, occurred to Helen. But she had not time to reason upon the matter, there she was, and home she must go.

Her companion walked beside her from the station in silence, but when the little gate opening into a path through a shrubbery, which was a short cut to the Hall, was reached, Helen stopped, and taking off Lady Olivia's shawl and veil, she gave them to Dickens, saying,

"I can go on by myself from this. Thank you very much for coming with me."

Her voice was very low, and it quivered as if she were going to cry; she looked deadly pale, too, from fatigue and agitation.

"I hope you will get in safe, ma'am," said Dickens. "Good night."

"Stay one moment," cried Helen again. "You seemed to know all this part of the country; tell me who your mistress is."

"I know it very well indeed, ma'am. My mistress is Lady Olivia Forrester, and she is often at Beauwood Chase with his lordship."

"Oh! thank you," said poor Helen, still more faintly. It but added to her misery to know that she had been rescued by one who was probably on her way to settle in the neighbourhood.

Dickens said good night again, and left her; she was not particularly interested in the companion of her hurried journey, but she was obliged to be civil and respectful.

Helen knew of but one way by which she could get into the house unseen. If

the housemaid had forgotten, as she very often did, to lock the door of the conservatory, through which the drawing-room first, and then the rest of the house, could be reached, she was safe; if not, there was nothing for it but to ring the bell, put a bold face on the matter, and account for her appearance as best she could.

But luckily the green-house door was open, and she was very soon cautiously making her way upstairs to her own room. The darkness of a night in June is rarely very dense, so she avoided making any noisy stumbles, and in her own room she knew where to find candle and matches. But for some time after she had softly closed the door, and knew that she was safe, she sat still upon the edge of her bed, to try and still the beating of her head and heart.

It was all over, and she was back again in her little room, but she felt, as many have felt before, when some strange and

unexpected thing has happened to them, almost a doubt of her own identity. Was it possible that she was the same Helen Calvert who had dressed in that room only that morning? Had she really been so many miles away from her home, and had she been sent back by a stranger who had been kind to her?

Her life up to the time of her first meeting with Percival had been so intensely common-place, so far removed from the possibility of romance, that when she had listened to his plans for the elopement, and his pictures of the happiness which was to follow, the thought in her mind had been that by no possible combination of circumstances could such bliss come to her. But now that she had made the journey with him, and heard, not from a third person, who might have deceived her, but from his own lips, that all through he had lied to her, that even when he had vowed that she was more than all the world to him, he was

plotting to make her, not his wife, but the plaything of an hour, it seemed to her as if nothing but what had hitherto appeared impossible could happen from henceforth.

Of course, being barely eighteen, and totally inexperienced as to the amount of misery and disappointment through which we can live very happily during our pilgrimage, she believed that happiness and she had parted company for ever when she left her false lover behind her at R—. She did not suspect that the mixture of gratified vanity and girlish fancy which had led her away was not real love, and she hated herself, and felt degraded in her own eyes, for having been so carried away by her feelings. Tears of bitter humiliation fell from her as she sat on in the dark room, but her anger was more against herself than against him—she ought not to have been such an easy victim, so ready to listen to him, so willing to trust in him ; and she was cut to the heart by the knowledge

that even when he had praised her beauty it had not been pleasant to him because it was *hers*. She had not possessed any individuality in his eyes, she had been just a pretty girl—a poor little fool, who was very fond of him !

Those words so carelessly spoken by Percival to his friend in the garden of the hotel rang in her ears still, and drove her almost wild ; her cheeks burned as she thought how true they were, but ere long the eager desire that came upon her to prove to him, if possible, that she was neither so fond nor so foolish as he imagined might have taught her that after all there was as little genuine love upon her side as upon his. But this knowledge came later.

It was nearly four o'clock, and almost daylight before she roused herself. She was very tired, and she was longing to lie down, and yet she could hardly bring herself to make the effort to undress. "How I hate you !" she said bitterly, as she took

CHAPTER IX.

POOR Helen ! It was weary work enough, that beginning just where she had left off, with all the pleasure and excitement of the past few weeks as completely at an end as if they had never been. She felt tired and languid in mind and body, and there were traces enough of what she had gone through upon her beautiful face to have excited the wonder and alarm of a loving mother or friend. But the careless and self-absorbed little brothers and sisters did not, of course, see anything amiss with "Nellie ;" and if she was more gentle with them than usual when they teased her, they were cruel enough to wish that she might often have a headache, as it made her "twice as jolly."

After the early tea, she submitted to be taken out of doors, and the presence of the elder sister being looked upon as a sufficient security against parental anger, the little flock clamoured about her to take them down to the river. She tried to resist, but in the end she was literally dragged there by the excited youngsters; and it was not until she actually saw the tree under which she had so often sat with Percival that she fully realized where she was.

She looked at the spot distrustfully, half expecting to see the familiar figure, and she coloured with shame and anger to remember how often she had watched and waited for him there. It was very hard upon her that the children should have decided upon the ground under that special tree for the scene of their games, but she soon left them, and wandered on by the river side, with all the misery she had endured the night she came home crowding back upon her mind.

The sweet evening hour was oppressive to her ; she wanted the summer to pass quickly away, and the dark, ungenial winter to come on ; when the green was off the trees, and when there was no brightness or sunshine around her, she might be able more easily to forget her folly and humiliation.

She sat down at last close to the edge of the water and watched listlessly the swift flow of the current. The voices of the children at their play came to her, softened by the distance ; but suddenly the laughter ceased, and she heard her own name shouted at the top of the childish voices. But she took no notice, and presently, to her surprise, a boat came round a bend in the stream, in which sat all the children, in a high state of beatitude, but still slightly awed by the extreme novelty of their position. Never before had they been in a real boat.

At first Helen saw the children only, .

then she noticed that a gentleman, dressed in the orthodox rowing costume of white flannel, sat in the middle of the little group, by whom his power to use the oars was considerably impeded.

"All of you sit down instantly," Helen heard him say, "or I must land you again. I did not take you out to be drowned."

He spoke like a man who was accustomed to be obeyed, and his voice seemed familiar to Helen; but she knew that she had never seen the man before.

"There's Nellie! That's our Nellie! Make Nellie come in too!" she heard the shrill trebles break out at sight of her, and the rower in vain tried to keep order. He pulled in towards the spot where Helen was standing, and spoke to her.

"I believe," he said, "that my cargo belongs to you. May I hope that you will come on board too?"

"What a lovely face!" he said to himself; and the man, who was supposed by

many a girl who had tried in vain to captivate him to be beauty proof, fell in love on the spot.

Helen, distrustful for the time being of all mankind, answered stiffly, "No, thank you, I never go on the river; papa does not allow us, and I think, if you please, that the children had better land at once."

"Oh, not just yet; I promised to take them a little farther, and then back to where we started," and before Helen could again remonstrate he had shot out into the middle of the stream, and the children, overjoyed at "Nellie's" defeat, broke out again into their unruly gabble.

In about twenty minutes the excursion was over, and the stranger was on the bank pulling in the boat by its chain. Helen was standing under *the* tree close by.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Miss Calvert," the gentleman said, without looking round, "but if you would be kind enough

just to help me to land these little——” he was going to call them “beggars,” but stopped short.

Helen went forward and grimly received each little boy and girl as he or she was lifted out of the boat. She was determined to be very dignified and not to give this new interloper any encouragement whatever ; but she could not help thinking, as she watched him furtively, how badly her somehow hero Percival would fare in comparison with this handsome young fellow ; he had such honest-looking eyes, and such a sweet smile, while on Percival’s more world-worn face there was an expression which those more experienced than Helen would have called cunning, but to which she gave no name, knowing only that it had always repelled her even while she had allowed herself to be beguiled by his persuasive words.

“I never can like or trust any of them any more,” she thought, as she saw the

youngest of her sisters, a plump and pretty little maiden of five, put her fat arms round the stranger's neck and give him a kiss; then, still carrying her, he turned to Helen,

"These little people tell me that your father is in London," he said. "I came over in my boat this afternoon to look him up; he knew me as a boy. Will you be good enough to tell him and Mrs. Calvert that we, my sister and I, have come to Beauwood Chase to settle for a while, I hope; at least, I am a fixture, but I can never answer for Olivia."

Helen turned suddenly very pale, and her companion felt puzzled to account for the look of pain that filled the eyes which were now raised to his, and which he was already prepared to swear were the very loveliest eyes he had ever seen.

"You know my name?" he said again almost shyly, after a pause.

"I think so," she answered very low. "Lord Forrester."

"Yes, and I am delighted to have had the pleasure of meeting you ; but I must not keep you out any longer, the grass is quite wet already under these trees, with the heavy dew. Good-bye." He held out his hand, she gave hers coldly and stiffly, and he jumped into his boat, delighted at having at last met with a girl who was reserved and dignified in her bearing, and not ready to flirt with the first man who came in her way.

"Yes," he said to himself enthusiastically as he rowed home, utterly ignoring the fact that he knew nothing whatever about Helen. "At last I have found the chain to bind me to home ! She is the sort of woman whom a man can marry without fear ; a gentle, modest, wild rose of a girl, who has not been hawked about from ball-room to ball-room, made love to by dozens of men, and as heartless as she is beautiful ! Nellie, the children called her ; she must be my Nellie, if I can but teach her to love."

It will scarcely be wondered at if, in such a frame of mind, Lord Forrester found the eight o'clock dinner with his sister somewhat tedious. It so happened that she also was preoccupied, and the unusual silence of her brother escaped her notice.

"Olivia," he said suddenly, when they were at length left alone, "I saw my future wife to-day, and she is the loveliest girl in England."

"Your future wife, Arthur! Do you mean that you are engaged?"

Lady Olivia tried to speak indifferently. She knew that her brother would marry some day, but the thought of having to share his love with anyone cut her as keenly as if she had been his mother.

"Engaged!" he repeated, with a merry laugh—"not yet, but I wish I had got even so far. You will like her, Olivia; she is so calm, so dignified, so utterly indifferent to admiration. I could see it in

every glance. You would never find her in such a scrape as you helped that mysterious young lady out of at R—— the other day."

Lord Forrester never lost an opportunity of chaffing his sister for having played the part of good Samaritan.

"Never mind my mysterious young lady; had you seen her, you would have been but too glad to help her yourself; she was very pretty, but not, of course, the loveliest woman in England."

"Ah, no; and you think I might have fallen a victim—not I. I have no sympathy with women who encourage men up to a certain point, and then turn round and say they never meant anything. I would not marry that girl if she had the beauty of Venus."

"You are not likely to be tempted, I suppose, if you can win the divinity you met to-day," replied Lady Olivia dryly. "Who is she?—do I know her?"

"You know her father and mother—the Calverts of the Hall."

"What, Tom Calvert's daughter? Has he another grown up? You know poor Edgar Westbrook's wife was Miss Calvert. Well, if this girl is as handsome as her sister, she must be beautiful."

She was too kind-hearted, and had too much tact, to tell him how much she disliked Cecilia Westbrook; and besides, it was possible that the sisters were not alike in mind, whatever they might be in person.

"I never saw Mrs. Westbrook," Lord Forrester answered, indifferently. He was thinking of the marvellous grace of Helen's attitude as she stood under the tree waiting for the children.

"You will come over to the Hall with me to-morrow, will you not, Olivia?" he said presently. "Mr. and Mrs. Calvert are in London, and she is quite alone."

"I cannot, Arthur; I have got some

news that will surprise you. My old friend Susan Melville is dying at Florence, and she has asked me to come to her."

"And are you going?"

"I could not refuse—indeed, I could not, Arthur."

"And has not Lady Susan her own sisters," returned Lord Forrester, in an annoyed tone, "for whom she could send?"

"You know her sisters have cast her off—all the world has cast her off!" cried Lady Olivia warmly, with a glow upon her faded face that made her look young again. "She has never had a kind word said to her since her—her misfortune, by one of her own sex except myself. She is dying now, slowly but surely, she says, and she appeals to me not to desert her. Oh! Arthur, I could not have believed that so young a man as you are could be so hard upon women."

"Because by meting out the severest possible penalties to those who are what

you call unfortunate, but what I call wicked and depraved, I would force women to see what they have to endure if they yield to temptation! I would not be lenient to any woman who had been even lightly spoken of. There are in society now women, known to both you and me, who could not, if all the truth were told, keep their place one hour; but they carefully avoid being found out, and so we meet them side by side with women to whom their very presence is contamination. If I were married it would give me less pain to see my wife associate with that deluded girl who calls herself Mrs. Clive, than with Lady Norwood; the one has been faithful to a man whom for years she believed to be her husband, the other——” There Lord Forrester paused, with an expression of intense disgust.

“I cannot agree with you,” replied Lady Olivia, “and if you were to talk until midnight, you could not alter my determina-

tion to befriend Susan Melville, now that she is alone and dying."

"My dear sister, I have no wish to alter it. You are quite capable of judging for yourself in such a matter; but you must not expect my sympathy. Your friend, Lady Susan, married a man beneath her in social position for his money, and then ran away from him and her children. Now, deserted by her lover, and very properly cast off by all her friends except one, she sends for that one when she feels unable to face death alone."

Lady Olivia made no reply. Dearly as she loved her brother, she was not blind to his faults, and hardness to those who had fallen from his high standard of right and wrong was amongst the gravest of them.

There were circumstances, too, of which he was quite ignorant, which made her kindness to this Lady Susan Melville more than usually Christian-like. The

young man with whom, many, many years before, the wife of the rich merchant, Mr. Melville, had eloped, had been very dear to Lady Olivia Forrester. He had hovered about her for a season or two, had at last asked her to marry him, and been accepted; then, when the day for the marriage was actually fixed, he had eloped with the dearest friend of his *fiancée*, a married woman.

All this had happened before the birth of Lord Forrester, and he naturally shared the ignorance of the outer world as to the reason why his sister seemed to have grown old suddenly, and before her time. To him she had never been young, and when he grew old enough to know what were the sins in women which society never condones, and learned the existence of a certain Lady Susan Melville, who had sinned, and bitterly repented when it was too late, and to whom his sister was ever loving and faithful, he was wont to give his opinion

upon such mistaken kindness, as he called it; first, with youthful vehemence, and then with the calm decision of more mature years.

He had grand theories upon the subject of women, and like all those who indulge in grand theories, he was very often inconsistent. He would not admit that, when society tolerates fast men, it cannot wholly suppress fast women, and that it is obviously unjust to expect women to be saints when men are encouraged to be sinners. The world asks a woman to be prudent, at least, in appearance; as long as there is no open breach of the laws of morality she is safe. Lord Forrester was at war with the world on that point. He insisted that no outward show of decorum ought to be allowed to gloss over laxity in principle or conduct, and the result was that, while men called him a "right good fellow," women unanimously voted him a "prig," for he would not submit to be made love to, and

out of the many snares set for him, he walked with an amount of careless and unconscious indifference which added insult to injury.

A celebrated beauty, whom we have heard him mention by name, Lady Norwood, laid a wager that she would bring him to her feet; but she lost ignominiously, and it was shrewdly suspected by her friends that she had gone too far in her desperate efforts to win, and had drawn upon her head a cutting rebuke; but she did not betray herself, and expressed her mortification only in the hope that the future Lady Forrester might turn out a fast woman.

It would, no doubt, have given deep satisfaction to Lady Norwood and her set had they known that "St. Antony," as they wickedly nick-named the young earl, had fallen in love with a girl of whom he knew absolutely nothing, and who had committed the terrible enormity of eloping

from her father's house with one of the fastest men of the day.

But in happy ignorance of this episode in the life of Helen Calvert, Lord Forrester, when he had parted from his sister after the conversation already related, went out to dream alone in the quiet summer night of the happiness which he hoped was in store for him. Already he had invested Helen with all the virtues which, in his opinion, every true woman ought to possess. He planned out every detail of his courtship of this proud, coy beauty who had treated him with such refreshing and unstudied indifference. He must be very cautious, he thought, not to startle her by any sudden avowal of his feelings; she must be gently and slowly awakened from her girlish ignorance of the "master passion," and he thought with rapture—for he was but human in spite of his theories—of the moment he might dare to ask permission for his first kiss to rest upon those pure and perfect lips.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Lady Susan's appealing letter reached Beauwood Chase, her friend made up her mind to leave England again without delay. During the many tours which she and her brother had made abroad, she had more than once diverged from their route to visit her unhappy friend, who had hidden herself in a little Italian town not far from the French frontier, and out of the track of tourists; but now that she felt her health beginning to fail, she had moved on to Florence, in order that she might not feel so utterly alone.

Of course, at that season, Florence would be unbearably hot, and Lady Olivia knew that, no matter how long she might be de-

tained, she could not hope for the companionship of her brother. It always gave her a pang to leave him, even for a short time, but now she might be away from him for months. Still, beneath all her regret, was the feeling that he could do better without her than she could without him; and now, perhaps, this sudden fancy for Miss Calvert would prove serious, that his marriage would quickly follow, and all his thoughts would be centred upon a new object.

She did not like the idea of seeing Mrs. Westbrook's sister the mistress of Beauwood; but, after all, she knew nothing whatever against the girl, she might be the very opposite of Cecilia in every way; but even if she were the exact counterpart, her interference would do more harm than good, if her brother were really to set his heart upon the match.

But although she tried to reason calmly and sensibly upon the matter, she felt

very sad at heart when she gave Dickens orders to prepare for the unexpected journey to Italy, and looked round the dear old rooms which it was just possible she might never again enter, except as a guest; for, after what her brother had told her, it was but natural to suppose that, before she came back to England, he would have brought his wife to the old home.

But she had other troubles just then, besides her natural regret at leaving her brother, for she had to see in London, on her way, one who was very dear to her, but about whom she was often sorely perplexed, especially as regarded the future. To make this more clear, it will be necessary to explain that Lady Olivia's kindness to her unhappy friend had gone much farther than Lord Forrester ever suspected.

There had been a child born about a year after Lady Susan's elopement, and this child, who was called Fortescue, after her worthless father, Lady Olivia might be

said to have adopted, for the poor little thing was sadly neglected; and when she was about eight years old, this true friend of her mother had her sent to England and to school at her own expense.

It was not without much anxious consideration that Lady Olivia had come to the determination to separate mother and child, and she did so at length, not because she feared to trust the little girl to her mother's care, but because she knew that the education which the little Leda—as she had been fancifully called—was likely to receive, would not fit her for the life which it was too probable she had before her—that of a governess. She was a clever and precocious child, and at a very early age remarkable for self-reliance and decision of character. At school she made few friends, but those who began by liking, ended by loving her with all their hearts. But her grand fault was want of perfect trust in others, or rather, her trust was

spasmodic, and easily broken up. She had no faith in her own power to attract or attach others, and she was always suspicious that affection and kindness were shown to her out of pity.

When she was a child, she of course only vaguely realised her sad position in the world ; but when she was old enough to learn her mother's history, she used to weep passionate tears in secret, and declare to herself bitterly that no one could ever love the child of such a parent. It was fortunate for her that an under-current of bright hopefulness in her nature kept her buoyant and cheerful, or with that morbid distrust of her own power to inspire the affection she yearned for, she must in time have become old in heart and soured in disposition.

She was rarely gifted in mind, having within her small slight frame the poetic soul of a true artist ; but with all her genius she was, happily for herself, too

practical not to see the necessity of curbing the wild flights of imaginative desire with which her ardent spirit was filled. If nature had denied her actual beauty, it had given one of the most beautiful voices in the world—rich, musical, and full of the most pathetic sweetness. She could act almost from her cradle, and every gesture was full of indescribable refinement and grace. It is, therefore, by no means strange that she longed to become an actress; but not until she was quite grown up, and had left school, did she venture to give utterance to her wish to Lady Olivia, whom she had been taught to look upon as her guardian and kindest friend.

Leda knew almost by instinct that her desire would not meet with any encouragement; but when she entreated, with tears in her eyes, that she might not be forced to go out as a governess, but allowed to work out her independence in her own way, the kind-hearted Lady Olivia was sorely per-

plexed. At last there was a compromise. Leda was to give up her idea of the stage, at least for a time, but she was not to go out as a governess. She was to cultivate to the very utmost her talent for drawing, which was by no means small, and to try to make out her living in that way. The girl gave way sadly ; she had no hope of succeeding as an artist, and she naturally failed to see, as Lady Olivia did, the temptations which beset the life of an actress.

However, it may very fairly be questioned whether there was not as much, or almost as much, peril for her in the mode of life to which she agreed so reluctantly. She promised to study hard to attain proficiency as an artist, but on one condition only : she was to be allowed to live alone.

"I am not afraid," she had said, in answer to all Lady Olivia's objections, "and if I were inclined to go wrong, the protection you offer me would not be any safe-

guard"—Lady Olivia had suggested that she should board with a quiet family in London—"and if you want me to be happy, do not oblige me to live with people who care for me only because I represent so many pounds, shillings, and pence."

Lady Olivia gave in, and agreed to allow her yearly the sum she had been willing to pay for her board and lodging until such time as the girl was able to earn money for herself. She was then established in two rooms, which she was allowed to furnish after her own fancy, in the house of a respectable widow, who had once been in service at Beauwood Chase.

Leda was charmed with the place, and declared that she meant to be as happy as a queen. Lady Olivia could not understand her rapture, for the house was a tiny place in a shabby dull street; but it was not more than ten minutes' walk from the grand old abbey of Westminster, and it was Leda's custom to attend the early

service there every morning, and then to go to South Kensington either by omnibus or underground railway.

The daily routine was an epitome of her inner and outer life: the beautiful choral service, to which she listened with so much reverend delight, represented the poetical aspirations which filled her mind almost to repletion, while the short journey through the grimy tunneling between Westminster and Brompton, followed by the wearisome, and to her uninteresting, studies in perspective, and the other technicalities of the art by which Lady Olivia tried to make her believe she was to become rich and famous, represented the practical and common-place side of her existence.

But she strove hard to give all her energies to the work she had chosen, not to please herself, but her kind friend and patroness. Her heart still yearned for the stage, and all her leisure time was given

to the acquirement of the training necessary to enable her to become an actress.

It was rather strange that her leaning was more to the comic, or serio-comic, than to the tragic side of the art, and she had rightly estimated her own powers in not wishing to essay the latter. She would probably have failed miserably as Juliet; but many a worse Rosalind or Beatrice has appeared in public than Leda made when she played either of these parts, with only old Mrs. Chester, her landlady, to look on at her in silent wonder and admiration.

“Why, miss, I’d never have knowed you, that I wouldn’t, if I’d come in promiscuous like. It would puzzle a jury, that it would, to say who you was when you begin to hact.”

She was just two-and-twenty, and had been for two years living alone in her furnished lodgings in Westminster, when, finding that it was hopeless, and mere loss of time, for her to persevere in the

attempt to make her living by art, she resolved upon the bold stroke of going upon the stage first, and of telling Lady Olivia afterwards.

She got an engagement without much difficulty; but, as may be supposed, her sanguine expectations were not realised, and success as a popular actress seemed very far away indeed. Managers were not likely to open their theatres without having ladies of assured position on the stage ready to fill all the principal parts, and poor Leda found herself invariably cast for the rôle of pert waiting-maids or funny old women. But whatever she did she did well, and she gained more than once the approval of the stage-manager from his own lips, so she schooled herself to wait, knowing that if she were but patient and painstaking an opportunity would occur to enable her to show of what she was capable.

Lady Olivia was terribly disappointed

when she heard that the girl had obstinately carried out her intention ; but she knew that in her case, as in many others, opposition would do more harm than good ; and, besides, as Leda seemed able to live on safely, although unprotected, as an artist, there seemed to be no good reason why she should not continue to do so as an actress.

Lady Olivia had old-fashioned notions regarding the perils of the stage, and at first she could not think of Leda except as surrounded by fast, unprincipled men, and by temptations of the most subtle and dangerous kind. She had, too, at her own desire, taken a stage name, and was known in the bills as Miss Amy St. Clair. But the girl used laughingly to assure her that she went and came to and from her work at the — Theatre as free from molestation as if she were visiting in a West-end drawing-room.

She had, of course, made acquaintances, but not any friends amongst her com-

panions in the green-room, and she could with perfect truth assert that not one of her new associates even knew where she lived or what her real name was.

It may be that Leda escaped disagreeable attentions from men who believe that all actresses not only like, but challenge admiration and love-making, because to ordinary eyes she would have seemed barely good-looking. It would have taken a poet to find out the beauty of that changeful face of hers, and a lover who was loved to have read the language of those beautiful dark eyes which were never, when she was off the stage, either mirthful or wicked, but soft, dreamy, tender, and almost sad.

Her hair was splendid, and of that rich, warm, golden brown so vainly imitated by those who try to improve nature by the aid of art; but her features, except her eyes, were insignificant, so much so that she had more than once heard herself call-

ed "that ugly little girl with the red hair."

From constantly dwelling upon it she had come, at length, to believe in that unfavourable verdict upon her appearance. But she had not acquiesced without some wavering upon the point in her own mind, for she had often seen her own face under the influence of strong emotion and excitement, and she knew that had it been the face of another woman she could not have helped calling it beautiful.

In figure she was small and slightly made, with beautiful limbs, feet, and hands; but she did not look little, she was so finely proportioned, and had she but known it, her rounded waist, full bust, and sloping shoulders would have attracted more admiration from mere beauty-worshippers than the prettiest face in the world.

She had been about a year upon the stage, working steadily, and not making, as it seemed to herself, either friends or enemies, when Lady Olivia got the summons

to Italy. She had not seen Leda for fully six months, so she determined to surprise her by a visit on her way through London.

She had never yet met her strange but very loveable *protégée* without pleasure, although it was curious how much the kind old lady always dreaded beforehand to find some alteration in the look or manner of the girl who was so wayward, and yet so easily swayed by loving influence. She never exactly knew what the change was which she expected to find, that is, she never put her fears into words; but the undefined idea in her mind was, that Leda would get into trouble through some foolish love affair.

She was, however, intensely proud, and was not likely to show much favour to any man who might for amusement sake single her out for conquest, but then, if that sensitive heart of hers were once really touched, Lady Olivia knew that the proud,

self-reliant spirit would give way at once, and that she would love with all the strength of her ardent and passionate nature.

Hitherto all the presentiments of evil had proved false, for Leda had invariably met her old friend with the calm and natural demeanour of one who has no secret to hide or to reveal; but on the occasion of her last visit, before starting for Italy, almost before she entered the little room, which the girl's artistic taste had made to look fresh and charming, Lady Olivia was conscious that the dreaded change had come.

In what did it consist? She could not tell. Everything seemed the same, the books and pictures she remembered were unaltered, and there were, as usual, flowers in abundance, and there were no traces of a recent visitor. The door leading out upon the landing was open on account of the intense heat, and Lady Olivia

paused just within the room to take in the scene.

Leda was sitting with her back to the door, and she was apparently absorbed in the work over which she was leaning. She was dressed in white, and her pretty hair was arranged more fantastically than Lady Olivia ever remembered to have seen it, but still it was quiet and natural, compared with the prevailing fashion. She looked, above all things, graceful, refined, and ladylike, and her protectress felt a pang at her heart. What was to be the end of this attractive creature? Was her life to be peaceful, uneventful, and happy, or to be spent, as her mother's had been, that mother who was now dying an outcast, the victim of her own sin and folly?

Presently Leda raised her head, and turned it critically from side to side, as she looked at her work; then she impatiently dashed away her pencil, and tore the paper, upon which she had been sketching, ruth-

lessly across. "It is of no use!" she said. "If I were to try for ever, I could not make it like him!" Then, as quickly as she had torn the paper, she put the pieces together again.

Lady Olivia went forward gently, looked over her shoulder, and saw the defaced sketch of a young and handsome man.

"Leda, what does it all mean?" she asked.

"It means that I am a fool, and that I ought to be ashamed of myself, and so I am!" cried the girl, impulsively crushing up the sketch in her hand, as she rose to confront her unexpected visitor. "I am glad you have found me out, Lady Olivia!"

"Found you out, child? What is there to find? I see nothing very alarming in the fancy sketch of a young man's head—especially now that you have spoiled his beauty."

"Ah! but it is not fancy," replied Leda.

"It is a likeness as good as I can make it of—of some one I have seen."

"Well, dear, you see a great many people, do you not, at your theatre?"

"Ah! why do you not understand? I have not seen him at the theatre, I have met him, but always by accident, and I have spoken to him, and I believe there is not anyone like him in the world!" She was on her knees now beside Lady Olivia's chair, and had hidden her face in the old lady's lap.

"There, there, do not be theatrical, whatever you are!" cried Lady Olivia, a little impatiently. "I have been afraid from the first that something of this kind would happen. Who is he? what is he? and how long have you known him?"

"I do not know what he is, I know only his name, and I met him for the first time six months ago."

"And how often since?"

"Twice only. Do not scold me, and you shall hear all about it, and there is nothing theatrical in the whole affair; it

is most painfully common-place and unromantic. I was going to rehearsal this very day six months, and when I got to Westminster station I found that I had left my purse at home, and that I had not any money to pay for my ticket. The original of that sketch was standing close to me at the time. I had not noticed him much before, but I think he was at the station door when I came in. He came forward and asked me to allow him to pay for me ; I did so, and then asked him for his address, that I might be able to send him stamps in repayment. He said at first that it was of no consequence, then he suddenly changed his mind and gave me a card with his name and address. I did not speak to him again, and he went away from me at once. The next day I sent the stamps, but without my name or address, and I went to my work by an earlier train, lest I should meet him. Now do praise me a little, Lady Olivia ;

I liked him so much that I thought it was the right thing to do. A week passed, and then he was at the station again when I was there to go by the earlier train. I avoided him, and for another week I went by a later train; then he appeared again, and spoke to me before I could manage to get away. He said he had wanted so much to thank me for sending the stamps, and that it was not kind of me to give him so much trouble as I had done by not keeping to my usual train. I am certain I might have trusted him, but I did not dare to do so. I spoke coldly, and even crossly, and he looked so hurt and sorry that I longed to beg his pardon, and to say something pleasant; but I managed only just to avoid missing my train, and I was half lifted, half pushed into a carriage by an angry porter. Since that day I have gone about in omnibuses, and I have not seen him again."

"Then what is the meaning of this?"

said Lady Olivia, touching the white dress.

"Oh! I wear it because it is pleasant this hot weather." Leda looked embarrassed.

"And this?" Lady Olivia continued, touching the knot of blue ribbon with which the sunny hair was adorned. "Is this on account of the hot weather too?"

Leda blushed scarlet, and covered her face with her hands.

"Ah, no!" she said; "but since I have known him I could not help wishing to look well."

"My poor lonely child!" cried Lady Olivia, kissing her fondly, "you have behaved as I have prayed you might be able to do if a temptation like this came in your way. I have no fears for you now, and yet I confess I came here to-day to ask you to give up this life and to come abroad with me. Read that," and she put Lady Susan's letter into Leda's hand.

The girl read it without visible emotion, and then gave it back.

"Do not think I am heartless," she said, "but I know it is better that we should not meet. Since I have heard her story I have always felt too much pity for her to have any room for love; it could not give her any real pleasure to see me, and we are better apart. Tell her, if you like, that I am well and happy, and perhaps before you come back I shall be famous."

"And you will write to me as usual, and promise me, before I go, to make no more sketches?"

"I promise faithfully; the spell has been broken by your discovery of my folly; I mean now to live for my profession alone, and time will bring success!" As she spoke she tore up the sketch into many pieces, and took the blue ribbon from her hair. "Behold Leda unadorned and in her right mind!" she said.

With a loving embrace Lady Olivia left

her, and, with a mind more perfectly at ease than it had ever been concerning her, started the same night for Florence.

CHAPTER XI.

LORD FORRESTER went to the station to see his sister off, and then he rode to Calvert Hall hoping to find that Mr. Calvert had come back from London. Had he remembered that Lady Olivia had read aloud from the *Times* at breakfast the death of Edgar Westbrook, he might have known that it was probable Mr. Calvert had been kept in town by the sad event.

The sun was streaming full upon the front of the ugly square building which a Calvert in the reign of Queen Anne had built for himself, and which the present owner would gladly have beautified a little had he been rich enough. The blinds

were all down, and Lord Forrester felt instinctively that disappointment was in store for him.

Having heard from the servant that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Calvert was at home, and that they were not expected for some days, he made and rejected in a moment a dozen plans for seeing Helen. He asked for her, and having heard that she was at home he sent in his compliments and begged to know if the children would like a row in the evening.

Helen would gladly have suppressed the message had it been possible; but she and the children were at their early dinner when it was delivered, and she was instantly assailed with clamorous entreaties that it might be accepted. It was not in her power to resist the spoiled crew, who threatened loudly to rebel if she refused; so she sent out a polite message in return to the visitor, who was already half roasted at the hall door, to say that the

children were delighted, and that he might expect them at six o'clock.

At five o'clock, Lord Forrester was at his post, hoping that Helen and the children would also be before their time, but it was past six o'clock when the little boys and girls appeared in charge of the nurse.

"I hope your sister is quite well?" the discomfited young man asked, as he filled his boat with the little party. They were unusually quiet, for the nurse kept them in good order.

"Cousin Edgar's dead, and Helen's making a black dress for me." A little girl volunteered the information in reply to his question. She had all day been bursting with the importance of the fact that a death had occurred in the family. "And that's why all our blinds are down."

"And Cecilia, that's my sister next to Nellie, is a widow, and she's got such a lot of money, nurse says, more than any-

one could count up in a week." A boy was now the speaker. "You never saw Cecilia, you didn't. We don't like her; she's a cross thing. Nellie's cross sometimes."

"But she don't pinch like Cissy!" the little girl interrupted. "And she tells lies, Nellie says." This last piece of information was added in a mysterious whisper.

Finding himself in a fair way to hear all the secrets of the family, and very much disgusted at the absence of Helen, Lord Forrester heartily wished the amusement over. He was conscious, too, that his position was somewhat undignified; it had not seemed in the least so the evening before when Helen had been waiting on the bank, instead of the lumpy-looking country woman who was the guardian of the Calvert nursery. How stupid he had been to forget that the death of her brother-in-law would keep Helen at home, and it would not be of any use for him to come

over again until he was certain to find her father and mother.

So, on the whole, the row was a decided failure, and Lord Forrester was but too thankful when a black cloud, which had looked harmless enough when they started, sent down a sudden shower. Standing up in his boat, he saw the children dart away through the grass, delighted to get the opportunity of wetting their feet.

So engrossed were they with this new amusement that the nurse's injunction to "thank the gentleman" was unheeded; but the "gentleman" was only too glad to be forgotten.

Some time passed before he showed himself at Calvert Hall again. Mr. and Mrs. Calvert stayed with Cecilia for a week after the death of her husband, and they of course knew nothing whatever of the deadly peril into which their other daughter had fallen during their absence.

Helen was the favourite of her good-natured, undemonstrative, and somewhat careless father, and if she had not escaped from the snare so artfully set for her he would have broken his heart.

Her altered looks and pre-occupied manner—she seemed to have put off all her girlish ways and to have become a woman all at once—puzzled him not a little; but he did not ask any questions. Poor Helen! she was so ashamed of her folly, and so angry with herself for having been so easily deceived, that she usually spent hours of every night thinking remorsefully of what she had done, and wishing she had some one to whom she could confide her troubles.

She could not tell her father, nor her mother, nor the sister of whom she knew so little, and who was five years older than she was, and who had her own troubles to bear, poor thing! Helen knew nothing whatever about Cecilia's

life. She had spent a week at Rutland Gate during the first year of the marriage ; but her sister had never asked her to repeat her visit, and Helen, in her innocence, supposed that the young husband and wife were too happy together to care about having guests in their house. Had she again fallen in with Lady Olivia Forrester, the girl felt sure she could tell everything to her, and get from her answers to the questions which perplexed her. She could not determine for herself whether, by that wild flight with Captain Percival (which would have had such a terrible ending for her but for Lady Olivia's kindness), she had put out of her power for ever the chance of some day becoming the wife of one very different from the man whom she fancied she had loved. But what had so soon suggested the idea of a happy future ? Could she tell Lady Olivia that it was the remembrance of certain dark handsome eyes

which she had seen for the first time the evening her little brothers and sisters had had the row? No, that would not be possible, seeing that the eyes in question belonged to Lady Olivia's brother.

And if it should prove true that Lord Forrester admired her, might not encouragement to him involve her in a hopeless difficulty? And if he went beyond admiration, and actually fell in love with her, what could she do but refuse him if he should ever ask her to be his wife, and by doing so, draw down upon herself the surprise and anger of her mother?

To confess her brief madness regarding Captain Percival, to admit that she had liked him well enough to run away with him, would be more than enough to turn Lord Forrester against her; and to marry him with the secret unconfessed, and knowing also that his sister had helped her out of the scrape, would be to begin her new life with an amount of deceit which

could not fail sooner or later to bring about disastrous consequences. Helen was by nature as truthful as Mrs. Westbrook was deceitful, and the only secret she had ever been obliged to keep weighed upon her like a nightmare.

And then suppose she were to brave all consequences and to marry, and after her marriage to meet Percival again, how could she avoid him, and even if avoidance were possible, how could she be sure that he would not betray her? Her knowledge of the world and its wicked ways was too slight to teach her that there is amongst men, such as Percival, a so called sentiment of honour, which will not allow them to betray even a woman who has played them false, or thrown them over at the last moment. It is only your ingrained "cad" who boasts of favours granted or refused!

It would not have been very flattering to Helen's self-love had she known what very little concern her sudden flight from

the hotel at R—— had given the gallant captain. He thought she had been very ingenious to escape from him so easily, and he had very quickly come to the conclusion that she must have overheard enough of his conversation with his friend in the garden to enlighten her as to his intentions respecting her, and he admired beyond measure her “pluck,” as he called it, in having baffled him.

“We are sure to meet somewhere some day,” he thought, “and then I must try to make her believe that she was mistaken.”

Knowing, as we do, Helen’s perturbation of mind just at that time, it will not be thought strange that she found it very difficult to enter into all that her mother had to tell about her “precious Cecilia,” of her strength of mind in “bearing up so beautifully” under the shock of Edgar’s death, of the trial his long illness had been, and of her undiminished beauty even in the unbecoming dress of a widow!

"She does not intend to wear her cap more than three months," Mrs. Calvert said. "It is so hot and heavy for her, poor young thing; but she has given orders for the most splendid monument to be erected over dear Edgar's grave in Kensal Green. He would be so pleased, poor fellow, if he could but see it, his taste was always so good!"

Helen listened almost in silence to all these remarks. She had known her cousin very slightly, and she had always thought he was "too young for Cissy." In her ignorance of facts, that was the only way in which she could account for the incongruity between them, which she could not help noticing during her one short visit. But she thought how sad it must be for her sister to lose her companion, and to be left a widow at three-and-twenty, and the hope that she might get to know her better, and to sympathise with and comfort her, made her accept with pleasure

the invitation which presently reached her from Mrs. Westbrook.

"I want Nellie to come and pay me a long visit," Cecilia wrote ; " I feel so very lonely without my dear Edgar. I am going first to the lakes for a few weeks, and then to Brighton for a little while for change, and the variety will be good for Helen, too. She has been buried quite long enough at Calvert Hall."

But when Helen arrived at Rutland Gate, Cecilia was agreeably surprised to find that she was neither awkward nor countrified, and if it was less satisfactory to her to see that Helen was almost, if not quite, as beautiful as she herself was, she was able, with her usual philosophy and self-control, to hide her feelings completely.

Six months before, Helen had given little heed to the fact that she was unusually handsome ; but Percival's admiration had naturally made her conscious of her attractions, while his cruel deception

had made her fear the power of the gift which had led her into such sore temptation.

Nothing could exceed Cecilia's kindness to her, and in the ambitious plans which she was for ever forming for her own advancement, a secondary part was always assigned to Helen. If the rich and beautiful Mrs. Westbrook were to marry a duke, surely a rich baronet, at the very least, might be found for Helen, who had no fortune but her good looks.

At the time of Edgar's death, Cecilia had more than £30,000 a-year, for since her marriage she had not spent each year more than a fourth of her income, and she intended, even before the period of her mourning was over, to take society by storm, and to dazzle the world with the combined attractions of wealth and beauty. Her first act was to take a charming house at Richmond, with grounds leading down to the river, and she did not spare expense to make the place

unique in every way. Everything was in miniature, but everything was perfect; and as Helen walked about alone through the pretty and elegant rooms, while Cecilia was busy giving orders to the workmen outside, she could not help echoing the general verdict of her family that Cecilia was a very fortunate woman.

As to the young widow herself, she seemed every day to develop some new power of attraction or fascination. It was so sweet to her to be absolutely her own mistress, to know that never again could she be troubled by the pale worn face of her husband, that his sad eyes could never again be turned wistfully upon her with an amount of silent reproach in them which had fairly maddened her at times. While he lived she had never looked at the diamond ring which had cost him so much; but when he was gone, and the secret connected with it was buried with him, she took it out, had it altered to fit

her finger, and wore it constantly, calling it her poor dear husband's ring.

To her father, of course, she had to tell a different tale. Seeing that he noticed it upon her finger, she said carelessly—"Yes, this is *the* ring; you see, it came to light, as I knew it would, very soon after Edgar's death."

"Ah, poor fellow, that was a sad business!" said Mr. Calvert; and then he made that quotation from the Latin which every schoolboy knows, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, and which is so easy of application, but which we are so prone to forget when, in what we call self-defence, we feel constrained to imply that those from whom we may be supposed to inherit our failings were not perfect.

Cecilia answered her father with a sigh; she was quite willing to allow Edgar's memory to be respected.

Her father's visit to her on that occasion had been of a business nature. His rich

daughter intended not only to be great herself, but to prove the good genius of her family. Not only did she send for Helen and supply her most liberally with handsome mourning for the man who had been both cousin and brother-in-law, but she relieved her father from some of his most troublesome and pressing debts.

He was most truly grateful for the timely aid; it enabled him to send his boys to school, and to provide a hunter or two for his own use in the season, while Mrs. Calvert could, even more fervently than before, talk of her "precious Cecilia."

Then, having furnished her house at Richmond, and arranged all business matters with her father, Mrs. Westbrook and Helen went for their tour to the lakes, where they spent about six weeks. From the lakes, about the middle of October, they went to Brighton. Cecilia engaged rooms at one of the fashionable hotels, and sent down her carriage, horses, men-

servants, and two maids. The result was just what she had anticipated; before a week was over, everyone was asking who the beautiful widow was, and, as a matter of course, her servants were not slow to circulate the amount of her income.

The fact that the young lady who was always seen with her was her sister, Miss Calvert, made people ask, "What Calverts are they?" Then it was found out that they were *the* Calverts of S——shire, and no one cared to inquire further, and to ask about Mr. Westbrook; he was dead and buried, but he had left his money behind him—so it was supposed—and it mattered very little whether he had had blue blood or black!

Before she had been a fortnight in Brighton, Cecilia had several visitors; people who had known her "dear mother as a bride," people who had once stayed in the house with Mr. and Mrs. Calvert, and had seen Mrs. Westbrook as a baby.

Cecilia received these overtures very graciously. Her new acquaintances, if not belonging to the coveted centre of the fashionable world, were, at least, on its frontier, and as such were worthy of cultivation.

Helen was charmed with her new life, and she very quickly began to grow out of the morbid and miserable state of humiliation which had taken possession of her after her elopement. At first she had gone about as if she had had a brand upon her, by which everyone could tell what she had done ; but she was soon able to shake off the absurd delusion, and to hope that the world was large enough to allow her and Captain Percival to keep apart for ever.

Judge then of her feelings when she one day met him face to face on the steps leading up to the hotel door.

CHAPTER XII.

HELEN was going out, accompanied by one of the maids, upon a shopping expedition, and Percival was walking with a gentleman, one of Cecilia's new acquaintances. He knew her in a moment, but he did not make any sign of recognition, even when his companion stopped and spoke to her. The latter was a married man, a member of parliament, and one of the most popular men in W——shire. His wife had been a Miss Smith, an heiress (it was said that half of a popular watering place near London paid its rents to her), and his marriage with her had enabled him to keep up his beautiful old home.

She was rather pretty and decidedly

fast; so fast, indeed, that soon after her marriage she had given her husband and friends some trouble to keep her out of serious mischief; but all's well that ends well. She was now supposed to have seen her folly, and she and the young widow were already such firm allies that Cecilia had promised to pay her a visit in W——shire.

“Sorry to find you're going out, Miss Calvert,” said Mr. Vane-Trevor-Smith. He had been obliged on his marriage to take his wife's name after his own, which had belonged to some Norman swash-buckler in the train of the Conqueror; but he was generally known as Vane-Trevor. “So sorry to miss you; hope your sister is at home. I am commissioned by Mrs. Trevor to ask both of you to join our boating excursion to-morrow. Allow me to introduce my friend, Captain Percival.”

Poor Helen felt her blushes growing

deeper and deeper as she returned Percival's grave bow. It was hardly credible now, to be sure, but the very last time she had seen him he had kissed her. Was it possible that he had forgotten her? She hoped so with all her heart.

Percival, who had been asked to Brighton by his friends the Trevors, for the special purpose of being introduced to the rich widow, was quite as much surprised as Helen herself. No one had thought it necessary to mention Miss Calvert to him.

"Do you mean to say that your handsome widow with all the tin is *that* girl's sister?" said Percival, when Helen had passed on.

"Yes, her sister, and as pretty again as she is; better figure, you know, and more to say for herself."

"Oh, hang it, man, a woman with £30,000 a-year may be dumb and deaf too!" cried Percival, laughing; and then he thought how lucky it was for him that

Helen had run away. "I owe her one for that, plucky little girl that she is!" he thought, as he dressed for a quiet dinner at the Vane-Trevors, where he hoped to meet the sisters. Cecilia intended to go, but Helen pleaded a bad headache, and her sister did not press her.

She had come back from her shopping before the visitors had left, and her nervous agitation had increased tenfold when, under pretence of looking if the sea promised to be calm enough for boating on the morrow, Percival joined her at the distant window, in which she had taken refuge, and whispered hurriedly, after one or two common-place remarks—

"Do not be frightened. I am not going to tell anyone, and I like you better than ever!"

Poor Helen naturally took those last words to mean that he still intended to make love to her whenever a safe opportunity occurred, and she was indignant

with him for supposing that she was willing to listen to him again ; whereas he had merely meant to imply that he liked her for her cleverness in escaping from him, and that he would not betray her for the world. She felt his cold blue eyes upon her face, and remembering those summer evenings by the river, she blushed painfully, and trembled in every limb.

"I wonder you dare to speak to me!" she said at last, in a breathless whisper. She saw that Cecilia was not only watching them suspiciously, but was actually coming towards them.

"You must not be too hard upon me," Percival was beginning, when Helen gasped out—

"Here is my sister!" and he took the cue at once.

"Yes, indeed, you have given yourself a sad wound with that needle," he said, bending down as if to examine her hand. "Do you not wish you were a child again,

that you might have a good cry?"

"What is it all about?" asked Cecilia.

"Your sister has pricked her finger badly with a savage needle," he answered. "I could not tell why she was turning such a deaf ear to all my eulogies upon the blue sea and the floating clouds."

"Indeed!" said Cecilia. "Have you hurt it much, dear?"

"No, not much," replied Helen, with tears of anger and mortification in her eyes, which Cecilia was too sharp to overlook.

"What is it all about?" she thought, "and why should he take the trouble to make up such an elaborate lie?"

She was already rather interested in the man to whom her friends had introduced her with the laudable design of match-making. She knew that he was not rich, for before he had appeared at Brighton Mrs. Trevor had told her all about him; but that he might one day inherit the old-

est earldom in England, she intended to keep him on the list of her possible husbands ; but then, if she honoured him with her friendship, there must not be any flirting with Helen.

“What was Captain Percival saying to you this afternoon that made you blush so, Helen? and you do not blush prettily, child,” she said, as she and her sister sat opposite to one another at their afternoon tea.

“Oh, nothing—only nonsense. I do not like him, Cissy!” the girl answered quickly, and then Cecilia read her a little lecture.

“You must never make so free with gentlemen upon so short an acquaintance, Helen. Captain Percival evidently thought you went away to the window in the hope that he would follow you. Men of the world look upon everything of that kind as encouragement.”

“Do they, really?” cried Helen, with a little toss of her head, “how very conceit-

ed they must be !” Then for the first time she thought of her elopement with secret elation. Here was Cecilia taking such airs of experience upon herself, but what would she say if she knew that she, Helen, had actually run away with this very Captain Percival?

But the excitement of seeing him again so unexpectedly had given her such a headache that she was really not able to go to the dinner party, and she did not know that her absence did not cost the gallant captain a sigh. At last he had found what he had spent many years of his life in search of: a rich woman, who was neither old, ugly, nor disagreeable. And to think that she should turn out to be the sister of the girl whose beauty had bewitched him a short time before, and who had been, he was now thankful to say, sensible enough to run away from him before she had compromised herself, and before he had become answerable for her !

He had thought Helen the prettiest creature he had ever seen; but he very soon came to the conclusion that Cecilia was much handsomer. Her features were, if such a thing were possible, too faultless, and her magnificent dark eyes had a defiant challenge in them which was wholly absent from the sweet and rather pensive blue grey eyes of Helen. In figure the sisters were singularly alike, and they moved and walked with an equal amount of grace and dignity of carriage; but Mrs. Westbrook was stouter than Helen. She had at one time been inclined to grieve over this inclination to plumpness; but finding that it did not pass a certain point, she decided that it was much prettier and more becoming than the girlish slightness which made Helen look so much taller than she really was. At fifty, Mrs. Westbrook might, perhaps, have expanded into a rather stout matron; but at three-and-twenty her enthusiastic

admirers declared that she had the most perfect figure in the world.

And her admirers increased day by day. Men, married and single, raved about her, and, what was infinitely more strange, women, one and all, pronounced her charming. If her claims to beauty could have been reduced to a simple question of good looks, and if it could have been proved beyond all power of dispute that her income had been grossly exaggerated, then, no doubt, her lady friends would have done their best to pull her down from the pedestal upon which those logical, but sometimes blinded creatures, the men, had placed her. But everything about Mrs. Westbrook, including even her luxuriant hair, was so genuine that to compete with her would have been clearly absurd. And so she was universally worshipped as a rare masterpiece of nature, a complete favourite of fortune, and people would as soon have thought of pronouncing

the "Transfiguration," or the "Last Judgment," to be spurious copies, as of detracting from the merits of Cecilia Westbrook.

With the greatest ease, as it seemed to her, she began to emerge from the obscurity in which she had passed her five years of married life. How right she had been that Edgar had been the clog upon her, and how pleasant it was to know that he was at rest under his handsome monument in Kensal Green, and that she had not ruined her future by any act of impatient rashness during his life.

As yet, Percival was the only unmarried man amongst her new acquaintances upon whom she bestowed a serious thought; and he had become such a frequent visitor at the hotel that Helen had grown accustomed to meet him every day, and he treated her with such marked respect that

she began to think that, after all, she had been too hard upon him.

But she was not in the least jealous that he had so pointedly transferred his admiration to her rich and beautiful sister. She knew now that she had never really cared for him; and as she every day learned some new, and, in its way, useful lesson of worldly wisdom, she wondered more and more at her own folly in the past.

She was more of a looker-on at that time than an actor in the gay life at Brighton, and as it was not Cecilia's object to bring her forward too much, she was allowed to keep in the background as much as she pleased. But her sweet face and gentle manner had made her a general favourite, although it must be confessed that when, as was often the case, she asked Cecilia to let her stay away from some pleasure excursion, dinner, or evening party,

she was hardly missed by her kind and admiring friends. She wisely used the opportunity afforded by Cecilia's liberality, and by her own comparative freedom of action at Brighton, to make up some of the deficiencies of her education. She knew that her father had not been able to afford her many advantages, and that she had trifled with the few that had fallen in her way, so, while Mrs. Westbrook was amusing herself, Helen was studying hard, and she became by degrees so interested and absorbed in her work that her love affair and foolish elopement with Percival began to vanish into the background of her thoughts, and she felt happier and more at ease than she had ever done in her own home.

I have already said that Percival was the only man amongst her new acquaintances upon whom Mrs. Westbrook bestowed a serious thought. She saw plainly enough that he hoped to make her his wife, but

she had not made up her mind to accept him.

It was true that he might one day be able to make her a peeress, but the chance was such a remote one that it was scarcely worth while to calculate upon it, and in the meantime he had not anything to offer her in return for her splendid fortune.

It was true, also, that she liked him ; there was something very attractive, to a woman such as she was, in the cool audacity of his manner. She liked his amusing stories, and, above all, she liked his undisguised admiration of her beauty. A woman of more refined mind would have resented the familiarity of speech and action in which he sometimes indulged, and for which she alternately snubbed or encouraged him according to her mood. Sometimes she laughed at him, at others she would keep up a pretence of anger for half a day, and then graciously forgive

him ; but, on the whole, they were capital friends, and he could not help hoping that after a time jest might be turned into earnest, and that he might be able to induce her to accept him as her husband.

Many an heiress he had, as his friends told him, allowed to "slip through his fingers;" but as they had invariably been old, or ugly, or both, he had always resigned himself to his loss with perfect philosophy. Only two seasons before his introduction to Cecilia he had been earnestly recommended to try to win one of two sisters with ten thousand a year each ; but they had red hair, not auburn or gold, but fiery red, and white, puffy faces ; and, with the saucy declaration that "carrots and turnips were his aversion," he had seen the ladies carried off by less fastidious rivals without a pang.

He very rarely made such a mistake as he had done in the case of Helen Calvert.

He well knew the risk he had run in carrying off a girl in her position ; but the temptation had overcome his usual prudence, and he was beyond measure thankful that the escapade had ended as it had done. The triumph of winning Cecilia Westbrook would more than compensate him for the many hard knocks he had to bear in his time, and he most fervently wished that he could bring about an engagement before she left Brighton.

Cecilia read what was passing in his mind just as plainly as if it had been printed before her, and the more serious he became the more cautious she was not to commit herself. She kept him on and off in the most bewildering and provoking manner, and he was at last obliged to leave Brighton without having found an opportunity of declaring himself.

When he had actually left, he was surprised to find what a change it made to him to be separated from her.

“I believe I have fallen in love!” he said to himself, as he looked at the photograph he had taken from her almost by force. “Well, I must make the best of it; it will give the pursuit a zest which has always been wanting before, and if I finally plunge into matrimony, the fetters will be a little less galling than they might otherwise have proved. I wonder what sort of a fellow Westbrook was? No doubt he was a fool about her, and she managed him splendidly; had plenty of fun on the sly, and got all his money comfortably settled upon herself without any damnable clause to interdict a second marriage. I wish I could hope to run in double harness before the season begins, and get my lady to present Mrs. Frederick Percival.”

“My lady” was a great ally of Percival’s; she also enjoyed the friendship of royalty, and her introduction would be

enough to place any woman in a sure position in the very best society.

These reflections passed through the busy brain of the gallant captain as he went up to town by "express" a few days before Mrs. Westbrook left Brighton. Her reception of his attentions during the past two or three days had been rather cold and capricious, and he believed that it would not injure his cause if he were to leave the field just then. And he was right; Cecilia had looked upon him as so entirely her slave that his sudden departure took her by surprise, and she was also rather provoked to find how much she missed him.

However, they were to meet in December at Cayve Court, the Trevor-Smiths' place in W——shire, and there was no doubt it would be easy for her to draw him within the charmed circle again.

During all this time, Lord Forrester had

been alone at Beauwood Chase. He had renewed his boyish acquaintance with Mr. Calvert, but had been terribly disappointed to find that Helen was likely to spend at least a year with her widowed sister, and was therefore not likely to be found at Calvert Hall. He could not ask for an introduction to the widow for the purpose of making himself agreeable to Miss Calvert; and the apparent impossibility of meeting the beautiful girl, who had flashed upon him "a phantom of delight" made him long to see her all the more.

He filled Beauwood with guests during part of October and November for the pheasant-shooting. He always invited Mr. Calvert to join the parties, and would ask him, with badly assumed carelessness, if he expected his daughters at the Hall before Christmas. The answer was always in the negative; and at last in despair the young man accepted an invitation from

his old schoolfellow, Vane-Trevor, to spend a fortnight in December at Cayve Court, little dreaming that Helen was to be a guest in the same house.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE short interval between the visit to Brighton and the visit to Cayve Court, Mrs. Westbrook and Helen spent very quietly at Rutland Gate. She lightened her mourning by putting off crape, her cap she had long since discarded, and she insisted that Helen should put off black altogether.

“You will look so much better in colours, my dear,” she had said, with a little air of patronage which sat very prettily upon her. “You are so thin and girlish-looking, and it is really absurd for you to keep on mourning for a man whom you scarcely knew. I mean to wear mine for exactly a year and a day, and I think

it will be very hard upon me not to be able to wear white at my age when I marry again."

"Then you do intend to marry again, Cissy?" said Helen. She was romantic enough to think that there ought not to be second love for a widow, and she supposed that Cecilia had loved her husband.

"Of course I do; do you think I have lived my life at twenty-three? There is your friend, Captain Percival; he would marry me to-morrow if I asked him."

"If *you* asked him!" cried Helen. "Do you not mean if he asked you? And why do you call him my friend?"

"Oh, because he talked nonsense to you that first day at Brighton! But I must confess that he did not pay much attention to you afterwards; that is one of the disadvantages of having a rich sister, my dear! You must make up your mind always to play second fiddle to me, Nellie."

"You are quite welcome to Captain

Percival," returned Helen, a little nettled. "I do not think he is even good-looking, and not half so nice as Lord Forrester."

"Lord *Who?*" cried Cecilia, astonished at this familiar mention of a man of whom she had never before heard. She was not a student of "Burke," and she did not know that Lady Olivia's brother was Lord Forrester.

"Don't you know Beauwood Chase," answered Helen, surprised in her turn. "But I forget; you have been at the Hall so little."

"What relation is he to that horrid old Lady Olivia Forrester, the most conceited and disagreeable old woman I ever met in my life?"

"She is his half-sister," replied Helen, thinking of the memorable occasion upon which Lady Olivia had not been disagreeable to her. "Do you know her, then?"

"I met her in Italy, but we were not intimate," answered Cecilia, and she im-

plied by her tone that she had been the one to hold back from Lady Olivia's overtures.

Then she began to reflect, as was her custom, upon possibilities. How delightful it would be if she could meet this Lord Forrester, and draw him along as a captive at her chariot wheels! "Refuse him and break his heart," she thought, "or marry him and make him miserable. Lady Forrester! Yes, that is a pretty title enough, prettier than Mrs. Frederick Percival! Poor dear Perry! it is such fun to see a man of that kind falling seriously in love, a man who has all his life been looking to the main chance, and who has at last found that expediency and inclination can go hand in hand."

Mrs. Westbrook had formed a very shrewd estimate of her admirer's character—he was one to whom might safely be applied a clever aphorism of the late Lord Lytton, for he would "never jeopardise

his career as a practical reasoner by an imprudent virtue, and never sully his reputation by a degrading vice."

The party was to assemble at Cayve Court early in December, and it was not to break up for a fortnight. The Trevor-Smiths were sensible enough when they contrived to get some agreeable people together, not to disperse them again in three or four days; besides, the annual county ball was to take place on the eighteenth, Mrs. Trevor was a patroness, and she quite looked forward to the triumph of bringing in her train the rich and beautiful Mrs. Westbrook.

She told her great friends, the Dowager Lady Belgravia, and her daughter, the Lady Frederica Southwark, that the prettiest woman in England was going to be her guest, and Lady Frederica, who was very plain herself, but very good-natured, quite looked forward to the advent of the new beauty.

"I hope she does not ride to hounds," she said laughing. "If I can hold my own with her in the hunting-field, I can submit to be eclipsed in the ball-room."

But on that score, Lady Frederica had no cause for alarm. She was not only the best horsewoman, but the best-mounted woman in England; still it was pleasant to hear that Mrs. Westbrook had not nerve enough to follow the hounds.

"I cannot understand why you ask that fortune-hunting Captain Percival," Lady Frederica went on when the hunting question had been settled to her satisfaction, and she heard from Mrs. Trevor the names of all the expected guests.

Lady Frederica was the second great lady in the neighbourhood, and, moreover, as she and her mother had been instrumental in getting the mistress of Cayve Court out of the foolish scrape before mentioned, she thought she was entitled to

interfere even with the visiting list of the house if she so willed.

"Oh! we like him," said Mrs. Trevor, conscious that she had given rather a lame reason, when it was so evident that her friends did not share her approval. "He is very amusing; and, besides, he admires Mrs. Westbrook immensely."

"Admires her forty thousand a year, or whatever it is she has," put in Lady Frederica, laughing. "I cannot endure the man, he talks so much slang, and he is so bumptious. I can understand people liking his old father, one of the few polished gentlemen we have left in England."

"Oh! I hope he is coming, too, for the ball," said Mrs. Trevor, who liked the son better than the father, but she did not dare to say so.

"Yes; and he will go to bed instead of attending it, as he did last year. I must hear what he thinks of your Mrs. West-

brook. But then if she is really as pretty as you say, he is sure to *like* her. Even at seventy-five an unbiassed judgment of a handsome woman cannot be expected from a man. I am so provoked with him for taking up those colonial people who have come to Merlin Park. He did his best to get us to call upon them, or even to send cards, but I am so glad mamma refused."

"I am always glad to oblige Mr. Percival," said Lady Belgravia, from her writing-table; "but I really cannot call upon every bushranger who settles in the neighbourhood."

Lady Belgravia had been a beauty and a *grande dame* in her day; she was *grande dame* still, but very charming, and when the stamp of her approval was given, the person or thing so honoured was certain of success.

The Honourable Guy Percival, the father of Captain Percival, was quite as popular

in his own way as was his contemporary, Lady Belgravia; but still, unaided, he found it by no means easy to get into society a family of rich colonists who had recently settled in his neighbourhood. The old father had been a man of some note in the colony to which, as a young lad, he had emigrated, but he was a nobody in England, in spite of the fact that he could with ease add ten, or even twenty thousand pounds to the portion of his daughters by merely giving an order for some sheep to be shorn in the Antipodes.

It was generally supposed that he was the illegitimate son of a certain noble family in England, and he was undoubtedly of gentle birth himself, but his wife was intensely vulgar, and his daughters, two of whom were beauties, and the third accomplished, had not the repose of Vere de Vere.

The great ambition of the youngest, who was one of the beauties, was to get

into the society of the "county people," and old Mr. Percival, who was always willing to please a pretty girl, did his best for her; but for some, to him inexplicable, reason, he could not succeed. He put all opposition down to jealousy of her beauty; but when he met Mrs. Westbrook and Miss Calvert at Cayve Court, he was obliged to acknowledge that beauty did not always stand in the way of a woman's popularity with her own sex.

"Now confess," Mrs. Trevor said to him on the evening of his arrival—"confess that my widow is prettier than your bush-ranger, as Lady Belgravia calls her."

"Yes, she is handsomer, I admit it," answered the old Adonis candidly. "I do not think I have ever seen a more lovely face and figure than she has. By Jove! if I were but twenty years younger—or shall we say forty?—it would be fun to try to cut out my son the Captain, who seems determined to go in and win this time."

"And such a prize!" cried Mrs. Trevor. "I think it is very lucky that Vane met me before she came out. What would my poor little fortune be compared with hers? She has very close upon thirty-five thousand a year."

"I suppose we may cut at least half of that off," said Mr. Percival, rubbing his nose incredulously.

"No, indeed, I assure you she has quite that, if not more. I had it from herself, and I saw her banker's book, and there it was in black and white."

"And what was the dear departed Westbrook like?—as old as I am, I suppose, when she married him, mercenary little wretch!"

"He was only twenty," cried Mrs. Trevor, delighted to disappoint the old cynic, "and she was eighteen."

"Oh! a love-match, then! I like her all the better for that."

"No, it was not quite a love-match

either, but he had been disinherited or something, she told me, for being dreadfully wild and extravagant, and she pitied him so much for having lost all the money that she married him. He was awfully in love with her, you know, but I think it was so unselfish of her, don't you?"

"I only know that I am not clear about the money yet. Was it hers?"

"Yes; it was left away from him to her, and she has it all in her own hands, and she has *such* a nice house in Rutland Gate, and the *sweetest* little place at Richmond; we are to have garden-parties there in the summer, and, of course, if she marries your son they will buy an estate somewhere."

"I am ready to make a bet with anyone that she will not marry Frederick; such a stroke of good luck never fell upon anyone belonging to me. By-the-by, that sister of hers is very handsome too."

"Oh, Nellie is such a dear nice thing!"

cried Mrs. Trevor, whose pet geese, for the time being, were all swans. "She wants drawing out a little, you know; she is rather shy."

"Perhaps Forrester may be able to do it; she looks very happy playing chess over there with him in that corner," said Mr. Percival, laughing. "Well, he's a capital shot, and deserves a pretty wife!"

Lord Forrester's delight may be imagined when he found Helen at Cayve Court. She certainly looked very different from the stiff, shy girl whom he had seen by the river side; but she was even more beautiful and attractive than she had seemed to him then, and he determined to do his very best to win her during the happy fortnight they were to be together. Mrs. Westbrook came upon him almost like a new revelation. He had heard his sister speak of a Mr. Westbrook, but it took him some time to realize that the beautiful and graceful woman whom he took in to dinner the day

he arrived at Cayve Court was the widow of the young man whom Lady Olivia had known.

Then he had to learn that this radiant creature who talked so cleverly was Helen Calvert's sister.

"Yes," she said to him, "Calvert Hall would have been my home, if I had not been adopted by my aunt, papa's sister, when I was a very little girl, and then, of course, at her death the right thing for me would have been to go back to my father and mother if an attachment had not sprung up between me and my poor dear cousin," then she sighed, and Lord Forrester thought what a very lucky fellow the cousin had been.

"It is a very sad thing," she went on presently, "to separate a girl from her brothers and sisters. When Helen came to me after poor dear Mr. Westbrook's death—he did not care for any of my family, so I saw very little of them during

his life—she was quite a stranger, and I feel that I hardly know her yet; not exactly what she is like in temper and disposition, you understand.”

“I should think a microscope would be necessary to find out Miss Calvert’s faults,” replied Lord Forrester, who was not yet sufficiently in love to have grown reticent in his praises of Helen, but still too much attracted not to break out at the first opportunity into extravagant praises.

“Do you think so?” said Cecilia, slightly elevating her eyebrows. “Oh! I assure you we Calverts are by no means perfect creatures; remember how very slightly you know us.”

“Do not remind me of my misfortune in being but the acquaintance of an hour,” replied Lord Forrester gallantly. “And besides, ‘if to your share some female errors fall, look in your face——’”

“And you believe them all!” interrupted Cecilia ruthlessly. “That interpolation

is not original. I read it in some book the other day, and it applies far more to me than to poor dear Nellie. But perhaps you intended it for me ?”

“For both ; and I reject your emendation *in toto*.”

Then the conversation became less personal, and presently Cecilia said,

“I think I had the pleasure of meeting your aunt, is she not, Lady Olivia Forrester, abroad.”

“Lady Olivia is my half-sister.”

“Oh ! indeed. She is so much older. My poor husband introduced me to her at Florence, where he had met her before, I think ; but I do not think she liked me. I am very quick at finding out when people like me.”

“And if you are unkind enough to keep a black list of those who do not, I am sure there are very few names upon it.”

“I have Lady Olivia’s there at present, but I think—I am afraid I may add yours.”

She looked up as she spoke with the most arch and coaxing expression in her eyes. As she was wont to say herself, no man between eighteen and eighty could have resisted it.

"Mine!" he repeated, suiting his tone to her expression. "Oh! Mrs. Westbrook, do not add mine, unless you want to make me miserable for life."

"It would give me more pleasure to make you happy," she answered with a sort of shy boldness, which did not very much offend his fastidious ideas; and Percival, who was watching her jealously from the other side of the table, wondered what that prig Forrester could have said to make her blush so prettily.

But although Lord Forrester had contrived to make more than one pretty speech to his charming companion, he was not an adept in the art of flirtation, as Cecilia soon saw, so she cleverly led the conversation back to the topics of the day, and she

talked so well that he was even more impressed by her wit and brilliancy than by her beauty, for he did not think she was as handsome as her sister. But he told Helen in the course of the evening that he thought Mrs. Westbrook was one of the best informed women he had ever met. Helen longed to ask him if he liked all women to be well informed, and wished she had some of Cecilia's general information.

"Of course everyone must admire Cissy, and like her the best," she said, half sadly to herself, as she undressed the same night when the party had broken up. "I dare say Lord Forrester will fall in love with her and want to marry her, and yet I am sure he liked me first. I wish I had never seen any of them; and oh! how I wish Mrs. Trevor would not send me in to dinner with Captain Percival. I never know what to say to him, and I am so afraid he will ask me why I ran away."

She might have been quite sure that that was the very last question he would think of putting to her—his anxiety was fully as great as her own to drop the affair out of sight altogether. He was by no means so well satisfied with his progress in Mrs. Westbrook's favour at Cayve Court as he had been at Brighton, but had he guessed that she had quite made up her mind to refuse him, should he propose, he would have been very seriously put out.

She did not avoid him pointedly, but she kept aloof from him with the most charming coquetry in the world; and with the same wiles, executed in a different manner, she did her best to allure Lord Forrester. Not that she wanted to marry him, but because she wished to prove to herself that she could make slaves at will, and also to take from Helen the triumph of captivating a man who had successfully resisted her greater charms.

But Lord Forrester was hard to man-

age. He still admired Mrs. Westbrook, but he had never liked her as well as on the first evening of their acquaintance. She had been less on her guard before him, and her manner with gentlemen did not please him. Even to himself she was sometimes far more free in speech than he approved, and more than once he even found himself wishing that she was not Helen's sister.

And yet, in spite of his reserve and fastidiousness, he many times, during the visit to Cayve Court, found himself almost irresistibly drawn away from the gentle and retiring girl, whom he knew he loved, to the side of the brilliant syren who talked so well and who was so gloriously beautiful. And when she had succeeded in her object, and chained the unwilling captive to her side, it was, even to a man who had such a small amount of vanity as Lord Forrester, very flattering to see all the little airs and graces of conquest laid

aside, and to have his opinion asked with so much deference, or to hear her say with such a pretty air of reproach—

“Lord Forrester never seems to care what becomes of poor me when we are out with the hounds.”

Mrs. Westbrook had taken to hunting, but not with enough of zest to put Lady Frederica in fear of her rivalry. The truth was she had not sufficient nerve for the sport, so she generally trotted quietly over a field or two, got through easy gaps in the fences, and made her cowardice an excuse for saying that she thought it was unfeminine to follow the hounds from “find to finish,” as some women did.

Percival and Lord Forrester were both hard riders, and the former had never yet given up a run to stay with Mrs. Westbrook; but on one occasion Lord Forrester, feeling satisfied that Helen's horse was fractious and bent on mischief, lingered by her side until all hope of catching up the

hounds was over, and upon that incident Cecilia was wont to found pathetic little reproaches upon his indifference.

It must be confessed that Lord Forrester was somewhat perplexed by her conduct. A vainer man might with some reason have come to the conclusion that this beautiful creature had serious designs upon him ; but the idea of any woman not waiting to be wooed was distasteful to him, and to find Mrs. Westbrook quite ready to take the initiative, and to make love to him, proved in his case a very strong antidote to her beauty and her many fascinations.

To get away from her to talk to Helen was like putting down a novel by Balzac or De Kock to take up a pure and simple story written for a child. He could not see a fault in Miss Calvert, and there was, happily for her, no one at hand to tell him that she had once been guilty of an act which he would have found it hard to for-

give in the woman whom he hoped to make his wife. And yet, even had the secret come to his knowledge, he would not have done wisely to pre-judge the girl on the strength of it. Nothing could more clearly have marked the difference between the real innocence of one sister, compared with the worldly-wise innocence of the other, than the fact that Helen had been so easily decoyed from her home by Percival.

Long before she was eighteen, Cecilia had known the value of standing well in the eyes of the world. She would not have trusted Captain Percival as poor Helen had done ; she would have flirted with him desperately day after day, and taken many a liberty of which her sister was incapable. But she would have laughed to scorn the idea of the elopement, to be followed by a secret marriage ; and she would then have boldly challenged the world to point out one flaw in her conduct.

It was only when writing to his sister, Lady Olivia, who was, as we know, spending the winter with her dying friend in Florence, that Lord Forrester ventured to enlarge upon his growing attachment for the gentle and beautiful Helen, and, as was natural, he very often mentioned her equally beautiful sister, Mrs. Westbrook, to whom, it must be admitted, he gave an ample amount of praise.

Lady Olivia, as she read the letters, thought of Edgar's warning ; but she felt that she had no right to use the knowledge which the perusal of the letter he had confided to her care would give, in order to prevent her brother from marrying into the Calvert family. She had no reason for supposing that Helen was not a fit wife for him, and she could but feel thankful that he had not fallen in love with Mrs. Westbrook. Had she known who Helen really was, she might have thought it her duty to interfere.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE days at Cayve Court passed away very quickly—too quickly by far to the two men, one of whom looked upon the other as a dangerous rival. There were large dinner-parties and impromptu dances every other night, and it was with great pleasure that Percival heard Mrs. Westbrook decline to join even in a quadrille.

He abhorred dancing, and always felt that he looked foolish when he joined in it; and it would have irritated him beyond measure to have seen Cecilia whirling about in the arms of other men. Lord Forrester, on the contrary, not only liked dancing, but he danced well, and to waltz with Helen was such pleasure that he

most unwillingly gave her up to other partners.

Percival used to sit by Cecilia as long as she allowed him to do so, amusing her with his smart remarks and amusing stories; and, after an evening spent in his company, she was always obliged to admit to herself that he suited her admirably, and to puzzle herself to find good reasons for refusing the proposal which she knew was inevitable.

It came at last. The day after the county ball set in with heavy rain, even the meet of the hounds had to be put off, and the guests at Cayve Court were all more or less tired out and unutterably bored. Cecilia and Percival, not having danced the night before, were, of course, fresher than any of the others; but still the day was an inauspicious one for him to choose, for Mrs. Westbrook had not been blind to the admiration she had excited the evening before—she had worn, for the

first time, the magnificent diamonds which she said were the gift of her poor dear husband, but which she had, in reality, presented to herself—and she had finally made up her mind that it would be utter folly for her to marry a man who had only vague prospective honours to tempt her with.

Lady Belgravia had been more than commonly civil to her—had proposed that her son's wife, the reigning Lady Belgravia, should present her at Court.

"I used to know your grandfather, my dear," she had said in her kind way. "Tom Calvert was one of the handsomest men in the Guards, and as great a dandy as D'Orsay himself, and I remember my husband and I once stayed at Calvert Hall when your father was just able to run about."

All this had been very pleasant to Mrs. Westbrook, and with such prospects opening before her, how could she bring herself

to marry a poor commoner. She slipped away after luncheon to the library, intending to spend the wet afternoon in a cosy chair over the fire with a book; but she had not been there more than half an hour when the sun began to struggle through the clouds and the door opened to admit Percival.

"I cannot find anyone awake enough for a game of billiards," he said. "Forrester and your sister are yawning over that everlasting chess-board in one corner of the drawing-room, and I believe the rest of the ladies are in bed."

"So you have come to inflict your dullness upon me," said Cecilia, without looking up from her book. "I feel very grateful, of course."

"No. I came to ask if you would come out for a canter with me by-and-by, when it clears; it will be a fine afternoon, the clouds are breaking already. May I order the horses?"

"No, thank you ; I am not going to ride with you any more, Captain Percival ; we have had quite enough of it."

"Not any more ? that is hard ! Why shouldn't we ride together to-day and to-morrow, and the day after and every day for the rest of our lives ?"

"I do not know, I am sure," she answered demurely, "except that it might become monotonous."

"Not a bit of it !" he said, in his most confident manner, as he drew a chair up close to her side. "Do be serious, Cecilia ; you know well enough what I mean. I want you to marry me."

"But suppose I do not want to marry you ?"

"I cannot suppose anything so dreadful ! Come now, do not laugh, please ; you must know that I am awfully in love with you, and if you do not know it, only give me the right to prove it, and I am not

afraid that the evidence will break down for want of strength."

"Suppose I were poor instead of rich, Captain Percival, what then?"

"Then I could not venture to think of you at all," he answered frankly; "but I know that if it were possible to live on air, and if one had no tailor's bills, you would still be the one woman in the world for me. I am not good at this preliminary business, Mrs. Westbrook; I have very often made love without feeling it, and now that I am hard hit I cannot get on at all, but with very little encouragement I might, perhaps, succeed."

"I have no doubt whatever on that point," she answered, with a provoking little laugh. "But I am not in love with you—that is, I do not like you well enough—no, you must not hold my hand—to give up my liberty again so soon. If you could make me a Duchess, now, or even a Marchioness——"

jection ; but in spite of it, his intercourse with Mrs. Westbrook underwent no perceptible change. She asked him to call upon her at Rutland Gate when he came to town, and she even promised to write to him now and then, if, in his turn, he would promise to keep her posted up in all the news of the gay world.

"You men hear so much gossip at your clubs, and you know everything that is going on," she said. "I like to hear things about my friends while the news is fresh ; a stale scandal is as stupid as a sermon."

As a matter of course, Percival promised to give her what he called the "straight tip" about everything. He was, for a man, an unusually good letter-writer, and he was charmed to be allowed to correspond with Mrs. Westbrook.

If Lord Forrester had had even one half the audacity of Percival, he might have left Cayve Court engaged to Helen Calvert ; but although he was quite sure about his

own feelings, he was by no means sure about hers, for the more Helen felt herself drawn towards him, the more cold and reserved her manner became. She had no means of deciding whether this new lover was more to be trusted than the old one. In some respects he was far less lover-like than Percival had ever been ; but then the latter was naturally bold, and he carried everything before him by the sheer force of audacity. Forrester was bold and timid by turns, and always more timid than bold, so it was quite possible, Helen thought, that he might be one of the quiet flirts against whom Cecilia had warned her—one of those men who systematically lay siege to a woman's heart, and who, when they have won it, calmly throw her over, and look out for a fresh victim.

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contrived to make it appear that she did not exclude Lord Forrester from her sweeping denunciation, and the result was precisely what she hoped it would be. The more attentive he became, the more Helen avoided him—she even once or twice voluntarily accepted the companionship of Percival, whom she both disliked and feared, to that of the man whom she knew she could like only too well if she allowed herself to do so, and she thereby complicated the relations between her sister's lover and her own most successfully, and, for the time being, made herself perfectly miserable.

The fortnight at Cayve Court came to an end at last, and Lord Forrester had not spoken. Utterly disheartened by the unexpected change in Helen's manner, and a little piqued also, he had tried to keep away from her as much as possible, and during the last days of his visit he devoted himself to Cecilia, not that he intended to

transfer his affection to her, but his object was to try to learn from her by-and-by whether there was any hope for him with her sister.

Of course it was a very silly and stupid thing for him to do, for, as he never mentioned Helen's name to Mrs. Westbrook, she not unnaturally came to the flattering conclusion that before very long one of the many coronets she hoped to capture would be laid at her feet. She intended to refuse this somewhat tardy lover very curtly, the favour not unwillingly bestowed upon Percival after his rejection was not to be repeated in the case of the Earl, and she intended to gratify the former by telling him that she had refused to be Lady Forrester.

So with the pleasant game of cross purposes in full swing, the party broke up; Mrs. Westbrook and Helen went first to London for a few days, and then to Calvert Hall, and Percival went to stay with the

friends whom he called "my lady and her husband," in fact their house was his home for six months out of the twelve.

Lord Forrester was not at Beauwood Chase when the sisters arrived to spend Christmas at the Hall, but Mrs. Westbrook had also asked him to call upon her in London, and it was with the desire to avoid him that Helen begged to be left behind when Cecilia went back to town. She was not very bright or happy just then, and Cecilia, who liked everyone about her to be in good spirits, acquiesced willingly enough, but it was arranged between them that Helen should return to Rutland Gate in time to be presented at the first drawing-room of the season.

Lovers are proverbially restless mortals, and Lord Forrester was no exception to the rule. Percival, although for him, as he expressed it himself, very "hard hit" by Cecilia, did not pine over his disappointment. Women were so capricious

that he thought it very likely she would change her mind and accept him by-and-by, so he was very happy and hopeful, and wrote her most delightful letters, which she duly answered; and if, as sometimes happened, he asked, half joke, whole earnest, whether she had found her "Duke," she would so charmingly give him to understand that, even if the Duke were to appear, he was to be accepted for his "strawberry leaves" only, that he could not help feeling flattered and elated by the thought that the prize would one day be his.

CHAPTER XV.

BUT, devoted as he was, Percival did not come to town as Lord Forrester did when the half-melted snow was still lying in the corners and the bleak wind of January was sweeping along the empty streets and squares of the West End. He lost no time in calling at Rutland Gate, and he sat for more than an hour talking to Mrs. Westbrook, and hoping that Helen would come in. He did not know that she was out of town.

When he at last reluctantly got up to go he asked for her.

"She is not with me at present," Cecilia answered, "and I am so sorry, for now that you are in town you might have escorted us to some of the theatres."

Lord Forrester, who would have cheerfully escorted her to Jericho if there was any hope of meeting Helen at the end of the journey, immediately proposed that Miss Calvert should be sent for; but Cecilia declared that it was quite impossible. The dear girl was enjoying herself so much she really could not ask her to come up to town while it was so dull; and poor Lord Forrester went away very much disturbed in mind. He pictured Helen to himself as a guest in some pleasant country house, admired and sought out by everyone; while, in reality, she was at Calvert Hall, leading the very dullest of dull lives, feeling keenly the reaction which had set in directly she left Cayve Court, and wondering why at her age she should feel so sad and so hopeless.

When he left Mrs. Westbrook, Lord Forrester walked away through the park. It was particularly damp and disagreeable, but weather had no power to affect him

jection ; but in spite of it, his intercourse with Mrs. Westbrook underwent no perceptible change. She asked him to call upon her at Rutland Gate when he came to town, and she even promised to write to him now and then, if, in his turn, he would promise to keep her posted up in all the news of the gay world.

"You men hear so much gossip at your clubs, and you know everything that is going on," she said. "I like to hear things about my friends while the news is fresh ; a stale scandal is as stupid as a sermon."

As a matter of course, Percival promised to give her what he called the "straight tip" about everything. He was, for a man, an unusually good letter-writer, and he was charmed to be allowed to correspond with Mrs. Westbrook.

If Lord Forrester had had even one half the audacity of Percival, he might have left Cayve Court engaged to Helen Calvert ; but although he was quite sure about his

own feelings, he was by no means sure about hers, for the more Helen felt herself drawn towards him, the more cold and reserved her manner became. She had no means of deciding whether this new lover was more to be trusted than the old one. In some respects he was far less lover-like than Percival had ever been ; but then the latter was naturally bold, and he carried everything before him by the sheer force of audacity. Forrester was bold and timid by turns, and always more timid than bold, so it was quite possible, Helen thought, that he might be one of the quiet flirts against whom Cecilia had warned her—one of those men who systematically lay siege to a woman's heart, and who, when they have won it, calmly throw her over, and look out for a fresh victim.

When conveying to her unsuspecting sister the useful warning that men were not to be trusted even when they seemed to be perfectly sincere, Cecilia had cleverly

"If I were not the only lady of your acquaintance in town," she said, with her most bewitching smile, "I might feel flattered by your visits; but I know you come only because you have not anything better to do."

"Indeed, you wrong me," he said, as earnestly as if he were pleading "Not guilty" to a capital charge. "It would have been just the same had town been full. I came yesterday to see you, I have come to-day to ask you, to beg of you—oh! Mrs. Westbrook, surely you cannot be ignorant of the state of my feelings, you must know what I am going to say."

"I think I do," she answered, contrasting with hidden derision his embarrassed prologue with Percival's bold attack, "but it would not be kind to let you go any farther."

"Ah!" he said, the eager, hopeful look dying out of his face, "then her manner of late has not been assumed, and yet at

first I could not help thinking that she liked me a little."

She! The truth flashed upon Cecilia, but not by the faintest change of countenance did she betray herself; he had actually come to sound her about Helen, and she had all but refused him on her own account. Surely, then, it was incumbent upon her to punish him for having so stupidly led her into such a blunder!

"Oh! Lord Forrester," she said, and her voice was as calm and sweet as it had been from the first, "it is of no use for you to try to gauge the feelings of a young girl by her manner; if you do, you are certain to fall into some fatal mistake. Now if dear Nellie, who has a way of her own for making herself agreeable to men, had begun by being reserved but had ended by being friendly and pleasant, I think you might have felt sure of her; but as well as I remember, she seemed rather to avoid you than otherwise during those

last days at Cayve Court. With whom used I to see her so constantly?—oh! with Captain Percival. He is rather attractive to some people; perhaps she likes him.”

“I do not think so,” said Lord Forrester decidedly; he was not very hopeful on his own account, but he felt quite satisfied that Helen did not like Percival. “However, Mrs. Westbrook, whether she says yes or no, I have made up my mind to try my fate, and I came to-day to ask you to help me. Will you do so?”

“With the greatest pleasure, if I can. Tell me what I am to do.”

“Write and tell her that I only wait to know if there is the slightest gleam of hope to go to her and tell her of my love; if the subject is unwelcome, she has but to say so frankly. I must then keep away from her and try to bear my disappointment like a man; but if she says ‘he may come to me to-morrow, next week, six months hence,’ that will be enough, and if love can

win a woman, she shall be won by mine."

"Bravely said!" cried Cecilia. "You deserve to win, you are so much in earnest. Very well, then; come and see me again on Saturday, this is Tuesday, the answer will be here by that time."

He went away very hopeful, and Cecilia sat down at once and wrote as follows, to her sister to Calvert Hall:

"If you are half as dull as I am, dearest Nellie, I pity you, and yet I have had one tiny bit of excitement. That exceedingly proper and amiable young gentleman, Lord Forrester, is in town, and what think you of a proposal from *him*? I wish it were in my power to give you so charming a brother-in-law, but it cannot be right to marry a man for his name and position to whom one is thoroughly indifferent; I fear this little episode will prevent us from seeing much of Lord Forrester for some time to come."

"So he was only playing with me after

all," poor Helen said bitterly, as she dropped the letter from her fingers. "How is it possible to know when a man means what he says?"

Then, as she remembered what had been said and done by Lord Forrester at Cayve Court, she was almost inclined to doubt the evidence of the words that lay before her in her sister's letter.

She answered it by return of post; wrote a long, pleasant letter, and alluded to the proposal, as might have been expected, in a postscript.

"Of course it cannot be right to marry a man you do not love." There was not another word.

Punctual to his appointment the eager lover came on Saturday, but all his hopes died out when he saw the expression of Cecilia's face.

"*I am* so sorry," she said, without preamble, "and quite vexed with that provoking child! I wrote her such a long letter

about you, and she answers in two or three words—‘Do you not think it would be very wrong to marry a man one did not love.’ Will it not give you unnecessary pain to try to see her after that ?”

The poor fellow she was deceiving so cleverly grew very pale, and although he tried to speak, his voice failed him. Cecilia laid her hand kindly upon his arm.

“Do not take it so much to heart,” she said. “You will find some one quite as well worth loving as she is.”

He made no reply, but disengaging himself from her, he left the room and the house, and went down to Beauwood Chase by an afternoon train.

And at Beauwood he shut himself up for a week, and was as miserable as a despairing lover ought to be ; he passed rapidly from the sorrowing to the cynical mood, and railed against the heartlessness of women to his favourite dog, who was at that time his only companion. Then a

sharp frost set in suddenly, and he roused himself to think about killing some more pheasants before the close of the season, which was close at hand.

Helen had treated him very badly, but that was no reason why her father should not have a good day's sport, so he asked Mr. Calvert to join him, and as the short day closed in at four o'clock, and as neither he nor his companion cared to make a toil of a pleasure, he agreed to go back to Calvert Hall to dine and sleep.

To his great astonishment, when he went into the drawing-room before dinner, he found Helen there, reading a fairy-tale aloud to one of her little sisters. She was pale enough when he looked at her from the door-way, but the pallor had given place to a deep blush as they shook hands.

"I understood from your sister that you were not at home," he said.

They were both rather embarrassed; she was thinking of his proposal to Cecilia,

and he of the curt manner in which she, Helen, had cut him off from all hope.

"I have been at home since Christmas," she replied. "Did Cecilia tell you I was not here?"

"No, not exactly; but when I suggested that she should ask you to come to town, that we might make up a party for some of the theatres, she said you were enjoying yourself too much to care to come to London at such a dull time."

"And you took for granted that I could not enjoy myself at home!" answered Helen, laughing. "I assure you that is a great mistake; we have enjoyed ourselves very much, have we not, Maybird?" she added, addressing the little girl who was lying upon her lap.

"Is not this one of my little friends of the boating excursion?" Lord Forrester asked, bending down to caress the little maiden; to do so gave him an excuse for lingering beside Helen, and, cruel as she

had been to him, it gave him exquisite pleasure to be near her again.

“Why can she not love me?” he thought. “Surely it cannot be that she cares for that fellow Percival.”

He spent a very pleasant evening, although he was broken-hearted. Helen’s secret attachment to him made her pity him for his rejection by Cecilia, so her manner to him was particularly gentle and kind.

“He will not suspect what I feel,” she said to herself, “so I can indulge myself by sympathising silently in his disappointment.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE next morning was again bright and frosty, and Helen meant to take advantage of it by walking to call upon some friends who lived about a mile and a half from the Hall. Lord Forrester sent on his servant with his T cart, and announced his intention of walking to Beauwood. His road and Helen's were the same as far as she was going.

She was in much better spirits than usual that morning, in consequence, no doubt, of the fine bright weather, and she infected her companion almost in spite of himself. They talked gaily about the visit to Cayve Court, admired Lady Frederica's horses and her riding, but they kept clear

of personalities. Helen was looking prettier than ever—the exercise in the keen air had given her a brilliant colour, and her spirits seemed to rise higher and higher with every step.

They had gone at first through the wood which ran parallel with the river for some distance, but after the first mile they were obliged to go out on the high road. A stile had first to be crossed—or, rather, one of those turnstile gates gone through which pass one person only at a time. Lord Forrester went first, then he held the gate at what he supposed was the proper angle for Helen, but she had not room enough. The result was a slight lock, which made them both laugh.

“You must let go, please,” she said, looking up at him gaily—and their eyes met.

“Helen,” he cried, obeying her without drawing back, for he caught her hand which held the top bar, “why do you

refuse me and then look at me like that?"

In an instant all her brightness was gone, and she turned very pale.

"Refuse you!" she repeated—"you know you never asked me."

"I did," he answered impetuously, chafing at the barrier between them, but too much excited to notice that, while one stood close to the gate at one side, and the other at the other, it was impossible for either to move. "At least, I asked your sister to find out for me if there was any hope."

"And she said——" gasped Helen.

But at that point a light seemed to break in upon Lord Forrester's mind. Was it possible that Mrs. Westbrook had deceived him?—and if so, why? As I have before said, he was not a vain man, so it did not at first occur to him that she must have tried to separate him from her sister, in order that he might become a lover of her own. But, after all, that being the only

reasonable solution of the mystery, (he did not know that she was jealous of Helen,) he was obliged most reluctantly to give the idea a place in his mind. It was well for her that he did so, for it made him feel chivalrous and tender towards her in his thoughts and words.

But just at first, as he stood with the gate between him and Helen, and with the hope of winning her stronger than it had ever been, he did not pause to reason about Cecilia's conduct at all—that came later on. Neither did her sister—she guessed there had been double-dealing, and she felt too sorry and too much ashamed to dwell upon it.

Lord Forrester did not tell her what Mrs. Westbrook had said, he only shook the unoffending gate impatiently, and I am afraid he used a little strong language, quite under his breath, to relieve his mind. Helen pulled her hand away from him—he had been holding it in one of his all that

time—and drew back; then he came through easily enough, and was at her side in a moment.

“Never mind what anyone has said,” he cried, stopping her by placing a hand upon each of her shoulders. She was tall for a woman, but he was over six feet, and seemed quite to tower above her as she stood before him—“Never mind what anyone has said, but tell me the truth yourself—will you be my wife?”

A pause of a few minutes followed, while poor Helen wondered if she might dare to accept the great happiness that had come to her. She could not forget that six months before she had listened to words of love from another, and had fancied, when he proved false, that all happiness was at an end for her. How if this, too, were all a delusion?

Lord Forrester thought those few seconds were an hour long, at least.

“Helen,” he whispered at last, “why do

you not answer me? Do you not believe in my love?"

"I do, I do," she answered, all her doubts of him vanishing in an instant. "Oh! will you be kind to me and love me always?" She was sobbing, with her head upon his breast.

"Why do you doubt me, darling?" he answered fondly. And then, with the usual pertinacity of a lover, he set himself to win from her the avowal that his love was returned. He was apparently successful, for with a radiant face he turned his back upon Beauwood Chase, and prepared to return to the Hall with Helen, in order to make his happiness complete by gaining Mr. Calvert's consent.

In spite of the cold air they walked very slowly, and it was not until they were within sight of the house that Cecilia's name was mentioned. There had been silence for a few moments, and the thoughts of both were occupied by her.

"I cannot tell him of her letter," Helen said to herself. "She must have been mad to tell such a falsehood! What could her motive have been?"

"The wisest thing is not to dwell upon it, and to say as little as possible to Helen—after all, they are sisters." That was Lord Forrester's reflection.

But Helen was the first to speak upon the subject.

"I suppose Cecilia must have misunderstood you," she said; and she spoke rather timidly. "She—she likes you very much, you know, so she will be glad to hear that we are engaged."

"Of course she will," cried Lord Forrester, generously. "I daresay I made a muddle of the business the day I called upon her, and that she could not make out what I was driving at. However, I made myself plain just now, Nellie, I hope, although I thought at one time that confounded gate was going to spoil everything."

And then they both laughed heartily, for they were very happy and easily amused.

By tacit consent Cecilia's strange conduct was not mentioned again, but with the kind intention of preventing any awkwardness between them in the future, Lord Forrester wrote to her himself to announce his engagement.

"I am sure it will gratify you to hear, dear Mrs. Westbrook," he said, "that having unexpectedly met your sister down here"—he dated from Calvert Hall—"I took heart of grace, and had the pleasure of hearing from her own lips that, when she marries me, she will become the wife of the man she loves."

Mrs. Westbrook took her defeat with perfect composure, but she resolved to be more cautious in future with those troublesome creatures, men. She fancied, from the wording of Lord Forrester's note, that Helen had not betrayed her, and she could but hope that confidence between the hus-

band and wife would not be more perfect than it had been in the first ecstasy of the engagement. She sent a few graceful words of congratulation to her future brother, and simply ignored what had taken place between them a few days before. To Helen she ventured to be a little more explicit in a letter marked "private," and to be burned as soon as read. She hinted her conviction that Lord Forrester had just for a short time allowed himself to be dazzled by the prospect of marrying a rich woman, but she was truly glad that in the end he had allowed his heart, and not his head, to guide him.

"For my own part, dearest Helen," she ended, with quite a pathetic peroration, "I have made up my mind that I have a great deal of this sort of thing to go through before I find—if I ever can find—a man who loves me for myself; but I do not *ever* again expect to meet with one who will, like Lord Forrester, be honest

enough to own his mistake, even at the cost of appearing fickle in the eyes of the woman who, happily for herself, was too shrewd to be deceived."

Even if that letter had not been marked "private," Helen could not have shown it to her lover. She felt sure that it was untrue from first to last, and then the old feeling of humiliation awoke to trouble her. How could she condemn Cecilia, when she herself was keeping a secret which would, she felt convinced, should it ever come to his knowledge, have power to separate her from the now ardent and devoted Arthur?

And there were moments when her fear that the discovery was inevitable became almost intolerable. There was Lady Olivia—was it not the most probable thing in the world that she would use all her influence to keep her brother from marrying a girl whom she had herself rescued from a most suspicious and blamable position?

It was true that Percival, if called upon, could exonerate her from all blame, and corroborate her story as to the time she had left her home ; but when she pictured the horror of Lord Forrester at being obliged to get from another man the assurance that his future wife had not been guilty of anything worse than folly, she could have laughed aloud at the serio-tragic situation suggested by the idea. She could but hope that Lady Olivia would be merciful, and not betray her ; but during the early part of her engagement, and until she had received some kind letters from her future sister-in-law, she felt as if she were walking near the crater of a volcano, which might at any moment annihilate her newly-found happiness.

Mrs. Westbrook's conduct to her sister was at that time, to all appearance, perfect. Not a sign of the jealousy she felt at the prospect of seeing Helen raised at once to such a high position in the world was al-

lowed to appear. But there were moments when she absolutely hated the poor girl, and cast about in her mind for some means by which she might, sooner or later, break up the felicity which she envied, and yet which would probably, after a time, have been too common-place and too prosaic to suit her taste.

Her nature craved for excitement and novelty, and, in her case, if an ardent lover were to subside gradually into an undemonstrative husband, it would be enough to estrange her from him for ever. But then it must not be forgotten that, as yet, she had never known what real love was, had never experienced the force of that mighty power which works such miracles in this world, which can tame the proudest spirit, and chain down the most erratic rover fast to one hallowed spot.

About a week after her engagement, Helen was at Rutland Gate again. Her marriage was to take place at the end of

March, and Mrs. Westbrook declared that there was no time to be lost in the preparations for the bride's trousseau ; she also insisted that the whole expense of the outfit should fall to her share.

Lord Forrester was at Beauwood House, Park Lane, superintending alterations and improvements for the reception of his bride. He was, of course, constantly at Rutland Gate, and as happy as a lover should be who has won the heart of a girl so beautiful and so charming as Helen Calvert.

Cecilia had met and welcomed him without a shade of embarrassment, indeed, so entirely free was her manner from confusion that he found it hard to believe in the truth of the theory so reluctantly entertained—namely, that she had cared for and had wished to marry him herself.

Percival heard of the engagement, and sent, through Mrs. Westbrook, his most sincere congratulations and best wishes to

the bride elect. He felt grateful to Helen, as we know, for having run away from him before any complications had arisen, and, besides, it pleased him to know that Lord Forrester was no longer to be feared as a rival with Mrs. Westbrook. He was quite aware that, during the approaching season, many far more formidable claimants to the hand which he coveted would appear; but he was determined not to despair, and he had great faith in the persevering assiduity with which he intended to follow Cecilia.

Lady Olivia heard of her brother's approaching marriage with pleasure. She could not help feeling a little jealous of the woman who would henceforth have the first place in his heart; but she was too unselfish not to feel happy in his happiness, and she read patiently page after page of his letters devoted to praises of his "darling," his "beautiful," his "perfect Helen!"

"She is so entirely my own," he wrote, "so fresh, so unhackneyed, as she has not been regularly *out* yet, that I have no fear of not having the first place in her heart. I could not bear to think that my wife had had half a dozen love affairs, or even one, before she married me! I was staying in the same house with her the first time she ever went into society, and it made her doubly attractive in my eyes to see the great dignity with which she kept her many admirers at a distance. Even to me she was scarcely more civil than she was to your pet aversion Frederick Percival, whom you accuse of having carried off the poor little girl you rescued so cleverly at R——, but now I know that all the time my own darling liked me," and so on *da capo*, until sheet after sheet of the thin foreign paper was filled.

A photograph of Helen was duly forwarded to Florence, and when she knew that the sending was inevitable, she gave

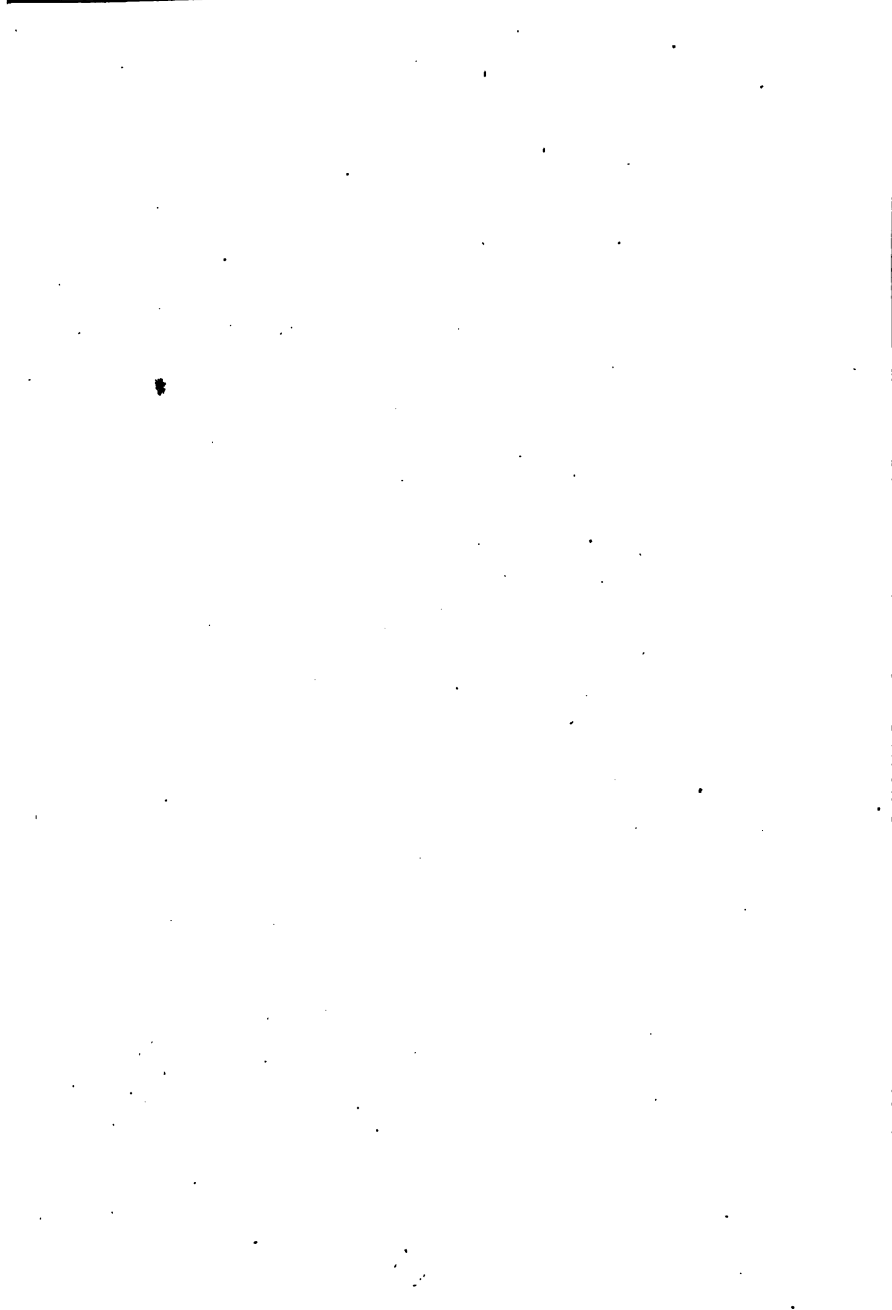
up all hope of escape from detection. But in the young lady with the elaborate and fashionable coiffure, and in the stylish dress provided by Cecilia's liberality and good taste, Lady Olivia utterly failed to recognise the tossed, frightened, and childish-looking girl in the shabby blue silk who had appealed to her for protection.

The likeness was shown to Dickens, who expressed her admiration with her usual sedateness. She did not see any likeness in the picture either, but she knew that the Miss Calvert who was going to marry the "young lord"—as she always called her mistress's brother—and the young lady whom she had taken home, must be the same person; but she held her tongue. She was afraid that some trouble would follow the first meeting between her lady and the bride, but she was not going to anticipate it by telling the former the truth.

So the winter passed away, Helen's fears

of discovery were not realized, and she gradually gave herself up to the enjoyment of her present happiness, and tried to hope that all might be well with her in the future also ; but still there is no doubt that that one false and all but fatal step had done much to embitter and sadden her young life.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





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